Nakama

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Nakama

by FragileTeacup

Summary

Hannibal Lecter is handsome, clever, rich, Omegan... and quite oblivious to the fact that he is hopelessly in love with his brusque Alpha mentor, Will.

Will Graham has always looked out for Hannibal, occasionally despairing of his young protégé's spoiled nature but valuing his companionship just the same.

They are the best of friends. But when Hannibal finds himself in the grip of a late first heat, both men are forced to confront feelings which neither are prepared for...

Nakama, a Regency A/B/O romance based on Emma by Jane Austen.

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'Oh, how you do love to lecture me.'

Hannibal Lecter, handsome, clever and rich, with a comfortable home and sanguine disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex him.

He was the younger of two Omegan children born to affectionate, devoted parents who, sadly, had not lived long enough to witness their transition to adulthood. Mr Lecter had been the victim of an unfortunate carriage accident; and Mrs Lecter, although a survivor of the tragic event, had pined so dreadfully for her lost mate that she too had passed away within six months of her husband's death. The children's Uncle Robert (their father's younger brother, and an Alpha bachelor of no inconsiderable means) had gladly undertaken to care for them, and had moved into the family home of Hartwell House with the minimum of fuss and a governess in tow.

Chiyoh had quickly become a favourite with Hannibal, who at five years of age had still missed his mother most dreadfully; and even Mischa, at the time an independent soul of ten, had grown to depend on their quietly-spoken governess as more friend than employee. Between Chiyoh and Hannibal, however, there had developed a particularly strong bond - not quite that of a parent and child, nor of siblings, but rather something in-between. The mildness of Chiyoh's temper had hardly allowed her to impose any restraint on her young charge, a situation that had suited the boy very well. And for sixteen years, their friendship had proven unshakeable, with Hannibal doing just what he liked: highly esteeming Chiyoh's judgement, but directed chiefly by his own.

The real evils of Hannibal's situation were the power of having rather too much his own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of himself. The danger, however, was at present so unperceived, both by himself and by most in his social circle, that it did not by any means spoil the enjoyment of a life filled with privilege and self-indulgence.

Sorrow came - a gentle sorrow - when, on a clear September morning in the year eighteen hundred and thirteen, Chiyoh married. The wedding over and the guests departed, Hannibal and his uncle sat down to dine together; and for the first time in many years, Hannibal Lecter felt what it was to be left behind. It was not a sensation that pleased him.

'Poor Chiyoh.' Shaking his head, Robert Lecter considered gravely the square of meat speared on the end of his fork. 'To have been apprehended and incarcerated in such a fashion. Eh, Hannibal?'

'Really, Uncle.' With a studied air of indolence, Hannibal laid down his own fork and sat back a little in his chair. 'Your sense of humour grows more droll by the year. As little interest as I have in the institution for myself, I certainly do not regard it as imprisonment.'

'Imprisonment? I gather that you are speaking of the wedding.'

The familiar drawled tones sent an equally familiar flood of warmth through Hannibal, and his eyes fastened with pleasure on the dark-haired gentleman who strolled into their dining

parlour with the air of one well-accustomed to so doing. Slim and athletic, he wore with ease the trappings of an aristocratic upbringing: fitted coat of moss-green velvet, faun breeches, black leather boots accentuating shapely calves, and a high starched collar and crisp white cravat framing a determined jawline. His coal-black curls were smoothed back from his face in a semblance of order, though as usual one errant strand fell across his forehead. Intelligent eyes of piercing blue scanned the room before alighting on its two occupants, and the sensual tilt of his lips drew from Hannibal a rare smile of his own.

‘Ah, Will!’ Robert waved their guest forward. ‘Do join us. And tell me how you found my niece.’

‘Mischa is perfectly well.’ Pulling out a chair opposite Hannibal, Will Graham sat down and waved away the servant’s proffered glass of wine. His calm gaze fixed on the younger of his hosts. ‘She thanks you for your letter, Hannibal, and promises to reply presently.’

‘I have no great expectation of that.’ Brows raised in scepticism, Hannibal sipped from his glass. ‘Doubtless life with your brother and my two rascally nephews keeps her endlessly busy. And now they have a new baby to contend with.’

‘Contend with?’ A faint frown marred the smoothness of Will’s forehead. ‘How very wearisome you manage to make domesticity sound.’

‘A fine statement,’replied Hannibal, completely unruffled. ‘Have not you declared many times that you intend never to marry?’

‘No, Hannibal,’ retorted Will, his expression strangely inscrutable. ‘That is your mantra, not mine. In future you should, perhaps, attempt to listen to *both* sides of a conversation.’

‘Oh, how you do love to lecture me.’

But Hannibal’s smile of amusement concealed an unexpected feeling of discontent. Will intended someday to marry? It made no sense. Why would Will, who had lived happily as a single Alpha for seven-and-thirty years, be willing to throw away his freedom for so paltry a thing as a wedding ceremony? To be lost to Hannibal, as his own sister had been since, at the age of nineteen, she had wed Will’s younger brother Anthony? It did not bear thinking about. And so, as with every other unpleasant thought that had ever entered Hannibal’s head, he brushed it swiftly aside. Will, meanwhile, was shaking his head wryly.

‘I would prefer to call it giving sound advice. However, I realise that you must both be feeling the loss of your dear Chiyoh, and so for this once I will drop the subject.’

Selecting a fat apple from the fruit dish, Will bit into it with relish, and Hannibal found himself peculiarly interested in the uninhibited way in which said apple was consequently devoured. It was no secret how little Will cared for the minutiae of social etiquette - the rituals and practices which Hannibal took great pride in perfecting, even as he felt contempt for those who observed them slavishly, were regarded as irritating affectations by his Alpha friend. But in those moments when Will disregarded them completely, as now, with his feet planted far apart and his mud-smeared boots shedding flecks on the pristine carpet, it was almost impossible for Hannibal to pay attention to anything or anyone else.

‘I am very happy for Chiyoh - or rather, for Mrs Crawford as she is now,’ proclaimed Robert. ‘It is Hannibal here who feels her absence most acutely.’

Bristling at the insinuation that he required for his happiness any company other than his own, Hannibal replied shortly, ‘On the contrary, for it was I who made the match.’

A snort from the occupant on the other side of the table was hastily covered by Robert.

‘It is very kind of you, Will, to come out at this late hour to call upon us. We have missed you, these last few days.’

As out of humour as Hannibal now felt, he could not but agree with his uncle. Will had been a constant in their lives for as long as he could remember. The owner of Lupus Hall, a grand and sprawling estate situated only a mile from Hartwell and the adjacent village of Balmore, Will was a frequent visitor and always entirely welcome - even when he took Hannibal to task, which it seemed to Hannibal happened more often than not.

‘I was sorry to have missed the wedding.’ Will took another bite of his apple, then asked cheerfully through his mouthful, ‘Tell me, who cried most?’

‘Who do you think?’ replied Hannibal dryly.

‘At a guess, our own dear Mr Franklyn.’

‘Quite right. Poor Franklyn does take these things so to heart,’ chuckled Robert.

‘Uncle, Mr Franklyn takes *everything* to heart.’

Hannibal’s reply was a touch more acerbic than he had intended, but the ludicrous way in which Will was demolishing his apple was proving most disconcerting. Lips wet with juice. The constant flash of teeth. And *tongue*. Really, it was almost indecent. He looked to his uncle, but saw nothing in his expression but amusement.

‘I shall call on the Crawfords next week and offer them my congratulations.’

Having finished the apple, Will was now looking about for a napkin; and fearful lest their guest should give up and take to licking his fingers - a prospect which sent Hannibal into something of a hot flush - he tossed his own napkin across the table with a disapproving click of his tongue.

Will caught it mid-air. ‘Most kind.’ But his eyes shone with knowing amusement.

Dinner over, they adjourned to the drawing room, wherein Robert and Will resumed a game of chess that was now in its fourth week, and Hannibal took up his sketch pad. He was aware of Will’s eyes on him from time to time, but continued his work without glancing up. Until, that was, the subject of the Crawfords’ marriage was reintroduced.

‘Was not it recently the anniversary of Bella Crawford’s death?’ mused Robert, as he debated whether to move pawn or rook.

‘Last month, Uncle. Mr Crawford had been alone for eighteen years - far too long, which is why I took it upon myself to promote his union with Chiyoh.’

‘Whatever do you mean?’ Will’s expression was withering. ‘You made a lucky guess. Hardly an arduous endeavour.’

But Hannibal was determined to give no quarter. Tapping charcoal against paper, he asked casually, ‘And have *you* never known the satisfaction of a lucky guess? I saw that they would be perfectly suited and I gave encouragement where it was needed.’

Ever the peacemaker, his uncle commented hastily, ‘At any rate, Chiyoh has now only one to please instead of two. An undoubted bargain.’

‘Especially when one of those two is such a troublesome creature.’ Hannibal directed a challenging look at their guest. ‘Is not that what you would say, were not my uncle present?’

‘If such a thought were in my head, I would say it regardless.’

The nonchalance of Will’s reply set Hannibal searching for a suitably tart retort, but once again his uncle was quick to interject.

‘Hannibal bears it well, but he will miss her exceedingly.’

‘Of course. And we should not like Hannibal so well as we do if he did *not* miss her.’ Will’s smile was as unexpected as it was warm, and Hannibal felt a tug of pleasure that did not abate even when Will added, ‘Still, it must be some consolation to lose her under so happy a circumstance.’

Features schooled to disguise his renewed feeling of cordiality, Hannibal returned his attention to his sketchbook. ‘If you say so.’

‘Come, now. I insist that the two of you be friends again.’

At his uncle’s concerned tone, Hannibal lifted his head in surprise.

‘Of course we are friends. We always say what we like to one another, Uncle, just as you and Father did.’

His eyes skipped to Will, but although the Alpha was smiling still, there was about him now a curious sense of strain that lingered even as Hannibal accompanied him to the front door. Seeking to restore their customary ease, Hannibal decided that gentle provocation was called for. With one hand on the latch, he turned to Will with a confiding air.

‘Shall I tell you who has been most on my mind this whole day?’

Vexingly, Will seemed at this to become even more guarded. Accepting his greatcoat and hat from the servant who appeared at his elbow, he busied himself fastening buttons as he replied, ‘I can hardly guess. Perhaps Mr Tier? Did he deign finally to make an appearance today?’

Hannibal looked at him blankly. The subject of Mr Crawford's son, a young man much spoken-of but never yet seen in Balmore, was ever a contentious one between them, and certainly far from *his* mind in that moment.

'He did not. But the person to whom I am referring is Mr Chilton. He has been vicar here a whole year, he has a perfectly serviceable house, and yet he has no one with whom to share it.' With satisfaction, he declared, 'I believe that he is deserving of my help.'

'In finding someone to fill the empty space? Hannibal, really.' But Will was at least laughing again. 'Invite him to dinner, by all means, but allow him to choose his own mate. A man of six-and-twenty is perfectly capable of looking after his own concerns.'

'Hm.' Speculatively, Hannibal tipped his head to the side, abandoning the subject of Mr Chilton in favour of another, altogether more intriguing one. 'Why did you think I was speaking of Mr Tier? You know perfectly well that he is looking after his ailing aunt.' And at Will's scornful look, 'If Mr Crawford has accepted his son's absence from his wedding, why should not we all?'

Frowning now, Will donned his hat. 'Jack Crawford is too good and fair a man to feel any such resentment, particularly given the circumstances.'

Hannibal mused on this as he pulled open the door. 'You think that Mr Crawford harbours feelings of guilt because he gave over the care of his child to his sister after the death of Mrs Crawford?'

'I think that any parent would suffer at least *some* guilt over such an action, no matter how well-intentioned.'

Bleakly, Hannibal looked out into the creeping dusk. 'I would not know.'

This display of vulnerability prompted a softening in Will's mood. Rarely these days - and frustratingly so - did Hannibal allow him a glimpse of the person behind his well-tailored facade. At one time they had been exceedingly close, and Will still treasured memories of teaching his young friend to fish and shoot in the park adjoining their estates. But the last few months had wrought a change in Hannibal - a gradually encroaching reserve - that was proving harder and harder to penetrate.

'Hannibal.' On impulse, Will touched his arm. 'You must not think that *you* will never -'

But Hannibal moved away. 'I do not wish to discuss it.'

Will's lips tightened and he gave a brief nod. 'Then I shall leave you to enjoy your evening. Goodnight.'

He did not linger, nor look back, but he fancied that he heard somewhat of a frustrated sigh from the proud young Omega standing in the doorway.

Good then. Some show of genuine emotion, even of the negative sort, is surely better than none.

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But Will continued to be troubled by what had passed between them; and three weeks later, as he sat in the Crawfords' parlour taking tea with the new Mrs Crawford, he was dwelling on it still.

'How go things at Hartwell?' enquired his hostess, in her usual quiet manner that was enviably suggestive of complete tranquility. 'I trust that everyone is well.'

'I presume so,' replied Will brusquely. 'That is,' he amended, at her curious look, 'I have been occupied with estate business these past weeks.'

'Ah. Then perhaps you have not heard of Hannibal's latest venture.'

'Concerning Mr Chilton?' Will sipped his tea, expression wry.

'Concerning Miss Abigail Hobbs.'

The name was vaguely familiar, and Will frowned as he endeavoured to recall where he had heard it. The details remained, however, elusive.

'I have not. Who, pray, is she?'

'A new addition to the Verger-Blooms' school.' Chiyoh adopted a confiding air. 'Miss Hobbs is the *natural* daughter of somebody, and although they have not seen fit to raise her, they have at least ensured her comfort and education.'

'I have no doubt that Miss Hobbs will benefit greatly from the attentions of Alana and Margot.' Will's features softened as he spoke of his childhood friends, whose marriage several years since had been the cause of much joy in the village. 'But what has any of this to do with Hannibal?'

'Well, it seems that Alana and Margot feel that Miss Hobbs will benefit greatly from the attentions of *Hannibal*. They called at Hartwell on Tuesday to make the necessary introductions. And it appears that Hannibal is quite taken with their newest pupil.' Chiyoh leaned forward, humour lurking in her dark eyes. 'I received a letter from him yesterday, full of praise for his new protégé. She is, he declares, an artless and deferential girl, with the softest of blue eyes and the sweetest disposition.'

Protégé?

The oddest feeling of discontent washed over Will, wholly unexpected and utterly unsettling, and he set his teacup on its saucer with a clatter.

'It sounds as if he is describing a dog,' he snapped.

'Will, really!' With a startled laugh, Chiyoh replaced her own cup. 'I am sure that he meant no such thing. You know how Hannibal loves his projects.'

'That is one word to describe it,' muttered Will darkly. 'Manipulations is another.'

‘Gracious, how very uncharitable you are being.’

'And another thing. Hannibal is far too young to have a protégé.'

'He is almost one-and-twenty.'

Will continued as if she had not spoken. 'Not to mention the fact that he is wont to foster co-dependency. He did as much with you, did not he?’

‘Not at all,’ replied Chiyoh briskly. ‘You are talking nonsense, Will. Hannibal could not have been more pleased to see me settled and married.’

‘When finally it suited him to do so,’ retorted Will. ‘You know, I suppose, that he is shamelessly claiming the entirety of the credit for your union with Jack.’

Chiyoh looked at him reprovingly. ‘In jest only, I am sure. You are far too hard on him, Will. You always have been.’

Will snorted. ‘If you mean that I do not fall in with his every scheme, and shower praise on him daily, then certainly I am hard on him.’

‘Yet I am sure that you love him just as much as I do.’

The confusion of feelings which this statement provoked was enough to silence Will for several moments.

‘Certainly I am fond of Hannibal,’ he managed at last. ‘Having known him all his life, how could it be otherwise? But he is spoiled, Chiyoh. That you must own.’

‘Spoiled? In what way? Certainly not by Robert.’ Chiyoh’s brow furrowed.

‘No, his uncle has always been a man of good judgement,’ allowed Will. ‘But Hannibal is by far the cleverest of his family and has, to all intents and purposes, been master of Hartwell - and, I may venture, of Balmore society - since he was twelve. He lives as a young god among you all.’ He shook his head. ‘He has his life mapped out with all the arrogance that superiority of mind has gifted him.’

‘Hannibal has also been gifted with good sense.’

Huffing at Chiyoh’s continuing stubborn defence of her former charge, Will could not help interjecting, ‘Which only makes his wilfulness all the more vexing. Do you know that he is determined never to marry? I do not think it has ever occurred to him that his heart may one day have other ideas. I should like,’ he muttered darkly, ‘to see Hannibal in love and in some doubt of a return. It would do him good.’

‘Indeed?’ A small smile played about Chiyoh’s lips as she picked up her cup and observed him over the rim. ‘How interesting.’

There was something in her shrewd gaze that prompted Will to change the subject to one altogether less controversial. But as there were only so many minutes that one could

reasonably pass in discussion of the weather, he soon afterwards took his leave.

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‘I am so looking forward to meeting Mr Graham.’

Hannibal hummed indulgently. Abigail was practically capering at his side, brown curls bouncing around her lightly freckled face, blue eyes sparkling from her exertions. After almost a full month’s acquaintance, he was sufficiently fond of her to have determined that only the best situation would do for dear Miss Hobbs.

Mr Chilton, perhaps...

Aside from her natural vivacity and eagerness to please, Abigail had further endeared herself to Hannibal by distracting him most creditably from the increasing sense of discomposure which several weeks of silence from Will had wrought. The invitations for afternoon tea had been sent out several days since; yet, while Will had replied both favourably and promptly, he had done so by post, rather than in person as was his usual way.

‘It is true that Mr Graham is a valuable addition to any party.’ With determination, Hannibal returned his attention to the matter at hand. ‘Yet he is not the only person of note who will be present.’

‘Oh?’

But Abigail’s attention had drifted, and the reason for this was quickly apparent. Towards them, on the opposite side of the narrow, dusty path, strolled a young man of perhaps four or five-and-twenty. Dark-haired and long-limbed, he wore the suitably innocuous garb of a working man, though the cut of his breeches and coat suggested that their owner was of a higher station than most. The man’s eyes widened slightly when he registered their presence, and Hannibal was amused to note the pinkening of Abigail’s cheeks as the stranger drew closer. His amusement was, however, tempered by the sudden realisation that the man was not, after all, a *complete* stranger.

‘Mr Lecter.’ A respectful doffing of his slightly scuffed black felt hat followed.

In response, Hannibal offered a brief nod. ‘Mr Brown, is not it?’

‘Yes, sir.’

For the longest time, Matthew Brown’s name had meant little to Hannibal beyond the fact that it belonged to a third-generation tenant farmer on the Graham family estate. On occasion, Hannibal had glimpsed Mr Brown at Lupus Hall (Will, rather quaintly in Hannibal’s opinion, considered the man a friend). Yet Hannibal had remained undisturbed by any curiosity about him. Until, that was, Abigail’s gushing description of the family with whom she had lately become acquainted through her connection with the daughter, a fellow classmate. Marissa was *the dearest and most loyal of friends*; her mother *baked extraordinarily delicious fruit pies*; and *as for the master of the house…* There had followed a lengthy oratory on the cleverness and kindness of Mr Brown, which had entertained Hannibal no end - up until the

point of discovering that Mrs Brown was a widow, and that the object of Abigail's infatuated declarations was, in fact, the young, *unmarried* Beta son. A single thought had flashed through his mind.

Oh, I think we can do better than that.

This opinion was unaltered by his observation of Abigail and Mr Brown as they stood slightly to one side, exchanging pleasantries and shy glances. And when, a few minutes later, Mr Brown took his leave and Abigail returned to Hannibal's side wreathed in smiles, the diversionary campaign was put into immediate effect.

'I have been considering,' he began, casually forestalling any attempt by Abigail to enthuse anew about her comely suitor, 'how fortunate we at Hartwell are to enjoy the company of eminent Alphas such as Mr Graham and Mr Crawford. I should like very much for *you* to benefit from their society.'

Abigail's nose wrinkled. 'But is not Mr Crawford old? Why, he must be at the least fifty.'

'Now, Abigail, that is rude,' remonstrated Hannibal, not ungently. 'Age does not preclude charm or wit. Besides, it is not of Mr Crawford that I speak. He is, after all, newly married, and his attentions are now necessarily directed elsewhere.'

'Then, besides Mr Graham, who else do you mean?'

Hannibal smiled. 'Tell me, have you met Mr Chilton yet?'

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Will arrived to an almost empty house and a direction to join the rest of the guests on the South Lawn. Judging by the sounds of chattering and laughter that drifted through the abandoned spaces, it was a lively party, and he felt a certain amount of anticipation as he strode through the vestibule towards the open patio doors. Stepping out onto the sun washed terrace, he almost tripped over the fat, dozing form of a peacock, and stifled a curse.

'Virgil, you idiot bird, get up.' Black-ringed eyes opened slowly and regarded him with lazy unconcern. 'Just like your master,' he muttered, and couldn't resist a quick shove to its plump belly with the toe of his boot.

Immediately, the peacock lumbered to its feet with an incensed shriek. Beady black eyes surveyed Will balefully before the bird tottered off around the corner.

'Going to tell tales, eh?'

Will followed, chuckling. The air was heavy with the scent of late-blooming honeysuckle, and a sluggish breeze plucked half-heartedly at the leaves of the great oak which dominated the lower end of the lawn. In its shade stood a young woman, posing prettily with a parasol. *Miss Hobbs, I presume*. Sparing her only a cursory glance, Will looked around for Hannibal and found him a little way off, holding a large canvas frame, deep in discussion with Mr

Chilton. *That dandy*. The obsequious clergyman was hanging on Hannibal's every word, although Will noted with satisfaction the complete indifference of his companion.

A young god.

The recollection of his scathing description gave Will pause as his gaze lingered on his friend. In truth, although his words had at the time been intended to provoke, it could not be denied that Hannibal had been blessed with singular beauty. Tawny-haired and golden-eyed, with features at once refined and sultry, his proud mien was entirely understandable. *How could he be expected to learn humility when all he has ever known is worship?*

As if to illustrate the point, Mr Chilton chose that moment to direct a particularly adoring stare at his host. Lip curling, Will headed in the opposite direction, to a wrought iron bench on which sat Robert Lecter with Jack and Chiyoh. To reach them, however, he was forced to cross paths once again with Hannibal's peacock, a tricky process as the fractious fowl seemed determined to aim its sharp beak at any part of him that it could reach.

'Dear me,' commented Chiyoh mildly, when at last Will had reached the relative safety of the bench. 'You do seem to have a unique way of upsetting Virgil at every opportunity.'

'The wretched creature has always hated me.' Scowling, Will nodded towards Hannibal and Mr Chilton, the latter of whom had now taken possession of the canvas and was exclaiming over it. 'What on earth is all that about?'

'Hm?' Chiyoh shaded her eyes. 'Oh, Mr Chilton. Hannibal is painting a portrait of Miss Hobbs, and Mr Chilton has offered to take it up to London for framing.'

'He has *what*?' The familiarity that such an offer implied filled Will with rancour. 'Damned cheek.'

'I wish that they would just get on with it.' Jack removed his hat and proceeded to fan himself vigorously with it. 'That poor girl has been standing there above an hour, but every time Hannibal gets in so much as a brushstroke, there Chilton goes, snatching up the painting to admire it anew.'

'Does he, indeed?' It was a toss-up as to whom Will was the most irritated with in that moment. The simpering Mr Chilton, Miss Hobbs for putting up with such unchivalrous behaviour, or Hannibal for orchestrating the whole egoistic scenario. He stood up abruptly. 'We shall see about that.'

'I think I shall accompany you,' announced Robert cheerfully.

'Hmph.'

Narrowly avoiding another attempted vicious pecking from Virgil, Will crossed the lawn to where Hannibal had just replaced the canvas on its wooden stand. In point of fact, the painting appeared all but finished.

‘Good afternoon, Will.’ Brush in hand, Hannibal bestowed his rather cool greeting without turning. ‘May I introduce Miss Abigail Hobbs?’

Will tipped his hat. ‘A pleasure, Miss Hobbs.’

A nervous giggle, and wide blue eyes peeped at him from beneath the lace trim of the parasol. ‘Oh, Mr Graham, good afternoon.’

Returning his attention to the portrait, Will frowned. A patchwork of pink daubs and prettiness, there existed on the canvas nothing of reality. It was all artifice, all pretension. However, even *his* bluntness of character balked at offering so savage a critique as that, and in the end he merely commented, ‘You have made her too tall.’

Hannibal hummed noncommittally, Robert covered a smile with a hasty cough, and Mr Chilton hurried forward to proclaim solemnly, ‘Oh, no! Certainly not too tall; not in the least too tall. She is perfectly proportioned.’

‘She is very pretty, Hannibal.’ Robert patted his nephew on the back. ‘And very like Miss Hobbs. Though perhaps she might benefit from the addition of a shawl or some such covering, eh?’ His eyes twinkled with merriment.

Hannibal pursed his lips. ‘If you have all quite finished, I should like Miss Hobbs to see the painting for herself.’

Meanwhile, the peacock’s querulous screams had grown persistent as it courted its master’s attention. Grimacing, Will retreated with as much subtlety as he could muster, moving slowly back and back until his heels struck gravel. It was a short walk from thence to the walled garden, and he set off at a quick pace lest anyone should call him back.

He was admiring the apiary and its frantic inhabitants when a voice coloured with amusement enquired, ‘Are you hiding from Virgil or from Mr Chilton?’

Bristling at the memory of the latter's presumptiveness, he replied shortly, ‘I was tired of being harangued by the great beast.’

‘I shall assume that you are referring to Virgil.’ Coming to stand beside him, Hannibal shot him a dry glance.

‘Assume away.’ But a smile threatened to tilt the corners of Will’s lips. He returned Hannibal’s look, glad to see a hint of warmth returning to those hooded eyes. ‘Come on, then. Tell me all about your new friend. Chiyoh informs me that you have been in raptures over her.’

This was met with a mild shrug. ‘A slight exaggeration, but it is true that Miss Hobbs is all that is amiable in a young woman.’

‘Is she?’ snapped Will, forgetting his returned good humour in an instant. ‘How nice.’

Hannibal’s lips set in a thin line of displeasure. ‘Really, Will, you have been most out of humour ever since Chiyoh’s wedding. I cannot account for it.’

‘Cannot you?’ Will turned fully to face him then, folding his arms across his chest. ‘You shut me out, Hannibal, as you are ever wont to do whenever a topic of a serious nature presents.’

He thought he detected a flash of pain at that, although it was smoothed quickly away. ‘Because I did not wish to discuss my - situation - on the doorstep?’

‘No, Hannibal.’ Impulsively, Will reached out to clasp his young friend’s shoulder. ‘Because you *never* wish to discuss it, and your lack of trust is, frankly, hurtful.’

Hannibal flushed at that, yet his eyes were beseeching. ‘It is not a matter of trust, Will, but of timing.’

Will regarded him broodingly. This barrier between them was of Hannibal's making, and Will's instinct was to tear it down. To insist on frankness and force *his* protégé to accept his help in the old way. Still, for the present he would not push any harder. ‘Then you will confide in me?'

‘When the time is right, yes.’ Hannibal’s hand covered his own. ‘It is not my wish to hurt you, Will. You are my oldest and dearest friend.’

‘Yet you hardly appeared glad to see me when I arrived.’ Instantly, Will could have bitten his tongue, but Hannibal only grinned.

‘I had to pretend indifference, or else Virgil would have been after *my* ankles.’

The press of Hannibal's palm was warm atop Will's hand, the firm musculature of his shoulder a pleasing shape beneath Will's fingers. His eyes fell to the defined contours of Hannibal's face: cheekbones yet youthfully rounded, rosy with the sun's glow; lips plump

and red and sweetly curved. And he felt suddenly the strongest urge to lean in and cover those lips with his own, to discover their taste and explore the shape of them. To gather close that lithe form and…

‘Come along, you two. Tea is served.’ With a wave of his hand, Robert disappeared around the corner as quickly as he had materialised.

Shaken by the complete inappropriateness of his thoughts, Will slid his hand from beneath Hannibal’s and stepped back. ‘Right, yes. Tea it is.’ Avoiding Hannibal’s quizzical regard, he added briskly, ‘We must not keep your amiable Miss Hobbs waiting.’

The discussion was thereby at an end. But Will felt the heat of Hannibal’s searching gaze all the way back, and he took care that they were not again alone for the remainder of the visit.

'Better to be without sense than misapply it as you do.'

The following morning, Hannibal awoke in an excellent humour. Mr Chilton was engaged that very day to deliver Abigail's portrait to London, and the prospect of such a romantic gesture being a precursor to an engagement of a rather more serious kind was most gratifying.

He took his breakfast in the drawing room, sipping hot tea with eyes half-closed as he relished the warmth of the sun filtering through the bay windows. Before long he was joined by his uncle who seemed, in contrast, a little out of sorts.

'I had a devil of a time getting off to sleep last night,' complained Robert, stifling a yawn as he helped himself to a hearty slice of plum cake. 'Virgil would not stop scratching at my window.'

'Will upset him.' Hannibal concentrated on applying a thin layer of butter to his toast before glancing at his uncle. 'You know how sensitive Virgil is. He is fearsomely good at holding grudges.'

'Perhaps,' allowed Robert. 'But if you ask me, he is also lonely. You might consider getting him a mate, Hannibal.'

In that moment, Hannibal was struck unaccountably by the memory of Will's fingers pressing firmly into his shoulder, piercing blue eyes lingering on his lips. For an instant, he had actually thought that Will might...

'Hannibal?'

'Hm?' He dragged his attention back to his uncle, who was leaning towards him with a look of mild concern.

'Are you quite well? You appear quite flushed this morning. Come to think of it, you looked rather hot and bothered yesterday.'

'It may have escaped your notice, Uncle, but we are in the midst of an absurdly warm autumn.'

Robert looked as if he wished to say something more on the subject, but the arrival of Abigail a moment later put a fortuitous end to the discussion.

'I am so sorry,' she cried, almost squeezing past the housekeeper, Mrs Gideon, in her hurry to reach Hannibal's side. In her hand, she clutched an unsealed letter. 'I could not wait another hour. I simply had to come and seek your advice. Oh, my spirits are in such a flutter!'

Rising from his seat, Robert took hasty possession of his plate. 'Well then, I shall finish my breakfast in the library and leave you young people to your intrigues.' And with a wink, he was away.

‘Do be seated, Abigail.’ Hannibal eyed the letter. Too wonderful to hope that it contained a proposal from Frederick Chilton - there was still much groundwork to be laid before such a thing could be accomplished - but it was clear from Abigail’s agitated state that *something* momentous had occurred. ‘And tell me how I can be of service.’

Taking the seat vacated by Robert, Abigail unfolded the letter and set it before Hannibal. ‘I received this before breakfast. Please, dear Hannibal, read it and tell me what you think.’

With no little interest, Hannibal began reading. It was not a lengthy exercise, for the letter was less than a page in length. Having read it through once, he did so again, then refolded it and passed it back to Abigail. Wide-eyed, she awaited his verdict, and he did not long keep her waiting.

‘I am surprised. I should not have expected a farmer to write so well or to express his feelings so sensibly.’ He took another sip of tea. ‘You must reply immediately, of course. It would not do to raise Mr Brown’s hopes.’

That the letter should be from Mr Matthew Brown struck Hannibal as both preposterous and highly inappropriate. *The nerve of the fellow. What could be his game? No doubt he wishes to raise his own station by attaching himself to my dear friend.*

‘Then you - you think I ought to *refuse* his offer of marriage?’

Recollecting himself, Hannibal met Abigail’s crestfallen gaze unblinkingly. ‘Is there any question? Forgive me, Abigail. I assumed that you had come here merely to seek my advice as to the *wording* of the refusal.’

Chewing her bottom lip, Abigail looked as uncertain as Hannibal had ever seen her. This was most encouraging, and he pressed on.

‘Poor Mr Brown. As admirable as his sentiments are, even if one were to overlook his humble situation in life, there is no getting around the fact that he is a Beta and therefore hardly the best match for you.’

Abigail’s brow crinkled. ‘But - I too am a Beta.’

‘Oh, Abigail.’ Grasping both of her small hands in his, Hannibal bestowed on her his most gracious smile. ‘Whoever told you that?’

‘Well, no one. That is, I have none, um, of the signs of - of -’

‘I understand,’ he interjected smoothly, taking pity on her clear embarrassment. ‘But you are yet young. It is rare, but still entirely possible, that your secondary gender has not yet presented.’

Abigail appeared to mull this over for a few moments, before her anxious eyes again sought his. ‘What would you advise me to do, Hannibal?’

He shook his head, releasing her hands. ‘No, Abigail. I have laid out certain facts, but as far as your decision is concerned, I shall not attempt to influence you.’

‘Oh dear.’

There followed a silence of several minutes, during which Hannibal calmly finished his breakfast while Abigail rose to pace the room, creasing the letter quite badly as she crumpled it in her agitation.

At length, she returned to her seat. ‘Hannibal,’ she began, with a grave air that gave away frustratingly little, ‘it occurs to me that, should I accept Mr Brown, I would by necessity forfeit your company. Please, speak plainly. Would this be the case?’

Taken aback, Hannibal took a few moments to consider his reply. ‘I shall not lie to you, Abigail. Society being what it is, it would certainly be - difficult - for our friendship to continue in its present form.’ He squeezed her hand. ‘But I would never abandon you entirely.’

‘I had not known the love of a family,’ whispered Abigail, tears welling in her pale blue eyes, ‘before I met you and Mr Lecter. I will not lose it now.’ She took a deep breath. ‘Therefore, I have made up my mind to refuse Mr Brown.’

To say that Hannibal felt no guilt whatsoever over this turnabout would have been to do him an injustice; his pleasure and relief, however, vastly outweighed any little gnawings of conscience.

‘Mr Lecter and I were only last night discussing the possibility of setting aside a bedroom for your own use, next to Mrs Gideon’s room,’ he said gently, determining that a change of subject might be wise. ‘And, if the Misses Verger-Bloom are amiable, we thought you could spend part of each week here, learning the social niceties, that your prospects might further improve.’

‘I should like that very much.’ Abigail’s eyes shone now glossy bright; though whether in celebration of her new status or in lamentation for the imminent loss of her friendship with Mr Brown, Hannibal thought it politic not to enquire.

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Three days had passed since afternoon tea at Hartwell when Will strode once again down its long beech avenue. A thin mist carpeted the lawn, weak sunlight infusing the gardens and the silhouette of the house with a milky glow. The single figure walking the perimeter, bundled against the morning chill, he recognised at once, and lifted a hand in recognition.

‘How goes it, Robert? Is your new houseguest quite settled?’

‘Goodness, news travels fast.’ Retrieving a handkerchief from the pocket of his greatcoat, Robert dabbed at his nose. ‘Yes, Abigail is proving to be a delightful companion for us both. She is gone to spend the day with the Misses Verger-Bloom, but Hannibal is in the drawing room if you would like to visit for a while. I must to my daily walk, if you will excuse me - Mrs Gideon is of the opinion that the weather will soon turn, more is the pity.’

‘Then you must enjoy the sunshine while it lasts.’

A shrill and unmistakable cry caused Will to whip around. He saw no immediate sign of the creature but blanched in anticipation of the possible pecking to come. ‘Is that dratted fowl not yet confined to the stables?’

Robert chuckled. ‘I assume that you mean Virgil. Alas, not quite yet. Hannibal is being rather stubborn about parting with him for the winter. Perhaps you can reason with him.’

‘Hmph. Miracles do happen, I suppose.’

In truth, Will was not sorry at the prospect of speaking with Hannibal alone. The strange tension that had been building between them was in need of dissipating, and as the elder of the two he felt it his duty to make the first overture. With that in mind, it was with a determined smile that he walked into the drawing room. At first it appeared that no one was within, but a slight movement drew his attention to the harpsichord in the far corner, where Hannibal was sitting scribbling earnestly on a sheet of paper propped in front of him.

‘Good morning, Will,’ he said, without looking up. ‘You have just missed Uncle Robert. He is taking his walk, if you would care to accompany him.’

‘I met him in the garden. But it is you I came to see.’ Will crossed the room to stand at Hannibal’s shoulder. He peered down at the sheet music, raising his brows at the myriad of crossings-out and ink blots. ‘Having problems?’

Hannibal’s lips compressed and he frowned at the paper. ‘I cannot seem to get the phrasing right. Perhaps I should abandon the composition and begin anew.’

‘Or you could allow it to evolve naturally, rather than attempting to bend it to your will,’ suggested Will gently. ‘It is not necessary to be always in control, Hannibal.’

‘I do hope that this is not the beginning of another lecture about Abigail Hobbs.’ With a sardonic glance, Hannibal abandoned his place at the harpsichord in favour of the table which had been set with a gleaming silver tea service. ‘Would you join me?’

‘Please.’ Will settled into his favourite armchair, watching with enjoyment the familiar ritual. Hannibal’s movements were, as always, a delightful combination of grace and economy as he prepared and served the tea.

Accepting his cup, Will inhaled the delicate scent with interest. ‘This is new. Flowers?’

‘Violets.’ Hannibal blew delicately over the surface of his own drink. ‘They add a subtle sweetness without detracting from the distinctive richness of the Oolong. Mrs Gideon is quite won over by it.’

‘Then it must indeed be exceptional,’ commented Will dryly. ‘To have tempted Mrs Gideon away from her favourite green tea is quite the accomplishment.’

For several minutes, they sipped in companionable silence. Will’s relief at the restoration of their former ease prompted him, by and by, to remark with a teasing smile, ‘I am informed

that you have not yet installed Virgil in his winter quarters. It would be better for him, surely, to be properly settled before winter sets in.'

'Better for him or for you and Uncle?' Hannibal's gaze was taunting. 'Is one small peacock really such a threat to you both?'

Small? The thing is a hideous goliath! But Will swallowed the words.

'Virgil is not the reason for my visit, Hannibal. I have something to say with regard to Miss Hobbs; and *this* I assure you, you will find not at all unpleasant.'

'Then by all means, say it.'

Hannibal's guarded expression relaxed and he offered a genuine smile; for a moment, the warmth in the young Omega's eyes quite scattered Will's thoughts, but he hastily recollected himself.

'I have good reason to believe your friend will soon hear something to her advantage.'

'Indeed? In what way?'

Although the question suggested curiosity, it seemed to Will that Hannibal was in fact wholly unsurprised and his eyes narrowed in suspicion. *Hannibal, what have you been up to?*

'One of my tenant farmers, Matthew Brown, wishes to marry her.' Watchful, Will continued, 'Miss Hobbs spent some time at Hunters Lodge with his family during the harvest, and apparently she made quite the impression.'

Hannibal only stirred his tea, eyes on the swirling black liquid. 'Enough for a proposal of marriage? My goodness.'

Will studied him, torn between irritation and a desire to keep their newly re-established peace. 'Matthew is a good friend, Hannibal. I trust his motives and I believe him to be sincere in his affection.'

'*He* may very well be,' was the cool reply. 'No doubt Mr Brown is aware of the very great advantages such a match would bring.'

'To Miss Hobbs, yes.'

'If you say so.' Hannibal's tone indicated a different opinion entirely. 'And is Mr Brown certain that Abigail returns his affection?'

Irritation was quickly evolving into annoyance. 'I would assume so, given that he has written to her to declare *his* feelings. Matthew is not the sort of person to inflict his attentions on an unwilling object. I have known him since he was a boy, and I would vouch for his genuineness of character without hesitation.'

'What touching loyalty,' commented Hannibal, with a tight-lipped smile that vanished as quickly as it had appeared. Abandoning his tea, he stood up and strolled over to the window,

hands clasped behind his back. And despite his growing anger, Will could not help but admire the graceful silhouette of his friend's slender profile. 'I will tell you something in return.' Hannibal's eyes glittered with triumph. 'Abigail received Mr Brown's proposal two days ago. She refused him.'

'She did what?' For a moment, Will was so incredulous, he hardly knew how to respond. He drew a sharp breath. 'You are asking me to believe that Abigail Hobbs, the natural daughter of nobody knows whom, has turned up her nose at a respected, intelligent gentleman-farmer? It cannot be.'

'On the contrary, I saw her answer myself.'

'You *saw* her answer?' His earlier suspicion horribly confirmed, Will's voice lost all warmth, and he set down his cup and saucer with an abrupt clatter. 'You mean you *wrote* her answer.'

He saw with regret and no little disappointment the moment Hannibal's evasiveness turned into defiant stubbornness. 'I may have been on hand to offer advice, but I can assure you it was Abigail herself who put pen to paper.'

'No, Hannibal, it will not do.' Glowering, Will stalked over to him. 'You have showered Miss Hobbs with exactly the wrong kind of attention - just enough to puff her up with a warped sense of self and raise her expectations.' He raked a hand through his hair. 'Cannot you see how profoundly harmful such manipulations are?'

Hannibal expressed his reply in tones of hauteur, chin jerking upwards. 'I certainly cannot. If for no other reason than that Abigail is, in all likelihood, Omegan. I am convinced of it. But because she has not yet presented, she has been dismissed as Betan and encouraged to throw herself away on mediocrity.'

'What nonsense!' exploded Will. 'Hannibal, you have fabricated an entire life story to amuse yourself. By my word, it is surely better to be without sense than misapply it as you do.'

For a moment, he entertained the notion of grabbing the boy and putting him over his knee, although never in his life had he raised his hand to another. But to his great perturbation, the fanciful idea aroused feelings wholly inappropriate and certainly nothing to do with actual punishment. He closed his eyes, took a deep and calming breath, then continued.

'Do not think that I am unaware of your machinations with regard to Miss Hobbs and Mr Chilton. I can promise you that it will come to nothing.'

'Now who is talking nonsense?' sniffed Hannibal, crossing his arms and staring stubbornly out of the window. 'Mr Chilton cannot do enough for Abigail. Consider the portrait that he took all the way to London to have framed.'

'The portrait that *you painted*.'

'What of it?'

Incredulous of Hannibal's wilful obtuseness, Will shook his head. 'Your infatuation with that girl has blinded you.' The words tasted sour, all the more so because he felt the meanness of them. Yet the idea of Hannibal investing all of his time and emotion in this other person - in *any* other person…

'Perhaps it would be as well to drop the subject,' clipped Hannibal.

'Perhaps it would be as well for me to leave.' Will turned abruptly, but he could not resist casting a final glance at his errant friend. What he saw in the handsome face still facing resolutely away prompted an unexpected pang of concern. 'Hannibal? Are you feeling unwell?'

'Not at all, I thank you.'

Ignoring the coldness of the response, Will stepped again closer, his anger dying as he noted with a frown the slight feverishness of Hannibal's complexion, and recalling that the same dewy flush had been present the last few times they had been together. 'I think perhaps you might be sickening for something.'

'Solitude, perhaps.'

Will drew a harsh breath. Enough was enough. 'Then I will bid you good morning.' This time, he did not look back.

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As much as Hannibal told himself that he was utterly unconcerned by Will's disapprobation, a general malaise had gripped him which he could not shift. His uncle's joviality, Chiyoh's serenity, Abigail's cheerful chatterings - none of these things were sufficient to shake him from his discontent. And so it was that on a dismal Saturday, as he sat beside Abigail, half-listening to her recitation of a riddle from her scrapbook (and attempting not to wince at its banality), he felt no particular interest in the letter which Mrs Gideon produced on a silver tray. That was, until he unfolded it.

'What is it?' Abigail eyed the paper with interest.

'A riddle from Mr Chilton, for your scrapbook.' Hannibal read through the neatly-penned rhyme, and when he passed it to Abigail he was smiling. 'There, Abigail. It is just as I thought.'

'How so?'

He tapped the paper. 'Read it and you shall see.'

The riddle was short and unimpressive; but as he read it for a second time over Abigail's shoulder, Hannibal felt an almost vicious satisfaction in the vindication he found within.

I have no beginning and no end.
I belong to one though two I blend.

I speak not yet I am understood.
A symbol of eternal good.

‘Um.’ With uncertainty, Abigail looked to Hannibal. ‘It sounds very romantic, but I cannot fathom the meaning.’

Smiling kindly, Hannibal pointed out a few specific words. ‘No beginning or end indicates a circle. And the circle itself is a symbol of two blending into one. Now do you see?’

‘Oh! Oh my goodness!’ Abigail coloured delightfully. ‘Is it - a ring?’

‘Unquestionably. Abigail,’ lowering his voice for the sake of confidentiality, ‘you do understand Mr Chilton’s meaning?’

‘I think so. That is - Hannibal, do you truly believe that he intends to *propose* to me?’

‘Nothing could be more certain. I congratulate you, Abigail. To have acquired two suitors within as many weeks is a fair accomplishment.’

For a moment, Abigail looked rather downcast, and Hannibal chastised himself for having too soon raised the spectre of Mr Brown. But he quickly redirected her attention to the piece of paper in her hand; and soon enough, shadows were driven away by smiles. Hannibal sat back, lost in silent self-congratulation. *Ah, Will, how vexed you will be when you learn of this turn of events.*

‘Shall Mr Chilton visit again soon, do you think? I hardly know how I will act.’

‘You will thank him for his riddle and offer him tea, Abigail. By all means take your cues from him, but it is for *him* to woo *you* and prove himself worthy of your affections.’

Abigail looked at him with curiosity. ‘I wonder that *you* should not have married, Hannibal.’

A wisp of memory then - his mother’s face, white and drawn, and the cold clutch of her hand as they had walked away from Lukas Lecter’s freshly-covered grave. At five years of age, Hannibal had been too young to comprehend fully the horror of Simonetta Lecter’s slow decline over the months that had followed, as separation from her mate had taken a deadly toll. But youthful ignorance had not saved him from the deep wounds that the subsequent loss of both parents had inflicted. The memories of those dark days were as scar tissue over his heart. And he had sworn never to bond with another - never to allow himself to become so entwined, so vulnerable to love that it could rend his very soul, as it had his mother’s.

But to Abigail he merely commented, ‘I have no inducement to marry, as I lack neither fortune or consequence.’

‘That is true, of course.’ Still, she appeared puzzled. ‘But what if you should fall in love?’

To that, Hannibal had only one abrupt comment to offer. ‘It is neither my wish nor my design to love in that way, Abigail.’ Tired of the turn the conversation had taken, he rose and held out his arm. ‘I believe that the rain has stopped. Come, let us take a turn outside and we can talk more of Mr Chilton.’

Not to anyone would Hannibal admit his deepest fear - that it was simply not in his *nature* to fall in love; that he was, in fact, incapable of so strong a feeling; and that the shameful fact, rarely alluded to, of his never having experienced a heat, was the physical manifestation of his emotional shortcomings.

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Autumn drifted into winter, and with winter came sharp winds and early frosts - but no Mr Chilton. He had been invited, apparently, to spend the entirety of November with an old college friend and his extended family in Bath. He had taken his leave of Hannibal and Abigail with many tender looks and sighs of regret, which had gone some way towards consoling Abigail, but Hannibal had been unimpressed by what he assumed was an act calculated to increase Abigail's affection by drawing out the courting period. Will, too, was notably absent. He had urgent matters of estate business which could only be handled in town, he had explained to Robert during a brief farewell call, and since he was overdue a visit with Anthony and Mischa, he would stay with them until December, when they would all return together to descend upon Hartwell enmasse for Christmas. During this speech, Hannibal had fastened his eyes resolutely on his sketching, and had looked up only upon Robert's embarrassed cough to utter a stiffly formal farewell. Will had frowned, nodded curtly and exited promptly. And although Hannibal felt that *he* was, in every way, the injured party, and that it was for Will to make the first overtures of reconciliation, his disquiet at their acrimonious parting began to disrupt even his sleep. Night after night, he fought through feverish dreams of Will's stern face close to his, his strong hands gripping Hannibal's shoulders, his voice growling indistinct words of reproach into Hannibal's ear.

One morning in mid-November, Hannibal awoke after yet another restless night to discover his sheets damp and his body drenched in sweat. His valet, whose entrance had stirred him to wakefulness, observed the scene with his usual calm, stepping over to the window to draw the curtains and open the casement.

'My apologies, Gideon,' Hannibal said, peeling off his nightshirt with a moue of distaste. 'This seems to be becoming a habit.'

'No apology is necessary, sir.' With calm efficiency, Gideon began stripping the bedding. 'If you can bear the discomfort a little while longer, I shall draw you a bath.'

'Thank you.' Hannibal seated himself at his dressing table and peered into the cheval mirror. His eyes seemed to glitter with a strange light, the rings around his pupils almost golden. 'I really cannot account for this.'

'Perhaps Doctor Sutcliffe should be sent for,' suggested Gideon as he rolled the sheets into a bundle, leaving the mattress exposed to the air. 'I am certain that Mr Robert would have done so already, were he aware of the situation.'

'I have no intention of bothering my uncle with such trivialities,' retorted Hannibal, ignoring his valet's reproving tone. 'If I felt ill, then I daresay I would consult Doctor Sutcliffe myself. This is, perhaps, merely a case of overheating.'

'In November?' came the dry riposte, which Hannibal chose to let pass.

There was, of course, one possible explanation which neither had spoken of, but to Hannibal it was as unlikely a prospect as it was unwanted. At almost one-and-twenty, he was already several years past the usual age at which secondary sexual maturity was reached, and he had long since resigned himself to life as a Dormant Omega. To be found now to be otherwise would be a situation of little advantage or appeal.

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'Well, brother, are you now content?'

Will cocked a brow at the drawled question, pausing as he assisted his youngest nephew from the coach. 'In what sense, Anthony? Careful, Florence. It is a deep step.'

The young boy tutted and looked up at him scornfully through a mop of dark hair. 'Me can do it, Uncle Will.'

'*I* can do it,' corrected Anthony automatically.

Florence turned back to regard his father with puzzlement. 'Yes, and *me* can do it too!'

Patiently, Will allowed his nephew to take the step himself, ready to catch him if necessary. 'You were saying, Anthony?'

His brother chuckled wryly, sitting forward in his seat and drawing his hand through wavy hair already greying at the temples, though he was but a couple of years Will's senior. Will had lost count of the number of times Anthony had joked that the single life was keeping his brother preternaturally young.

'Only that in these last two weeks, you have been as restless as I have ever seen you. I assumed that you were anxious to return to your Balmore friends.'

'Not particularly.'

Bristling a little at his brother's obvious fishing, Will started up the driveway of Hartwell House, tugged all the while by the impatient five-year-old. His sister-in-law he left to the gallantry of his brother, while six-year-old Valentine and baby Hanna followed with the children's nurse. At the head of this troupe, Will marched up to the front door and rapped smartly, the knowledge that he would shortly once again be face to face with Hannibal causing his heart to thump rather oddly. Dismissing this reaction as symptomatic of anxiety over their recent quarrel, he nevertheless found himself smoothing back his hair as Florence gazed at him questioningly.

'You look very nice, Uncle Will. You took long times dressing this morning. Are there important people here?'

Mercifully, at that very moment the door swung open, and the child was swept up, giggling, into the arms of a beaming Robert Lecter.

'My goodness, young sir, how you have grown! Have you been swallowing whole cows again?'

Two things struck Will as he followed them into the house. One was that Robert Lecter seemed unaccountably and most uncharacteristically nervous, his darting glances between bouts of chuckling betraying some unease of spirit. The other was that, beneath the rather pungent smell of beeswax - for every surface seemed to have been newly polished - there drifted an enticing scent which stopped him momentarily in his tracks.

Omega.

It was the sweet perfume of honeysuckle and roses, drifting on the air and lingering as on the balmiest of evenings. At once new and frustratingly familiar, he could not place it. Bracing himself for the ordeal of unknown company, Will entered the drawing room and was confused to find within only Hannibal, much as he had found him last, seated at the harpsichord making careful notations. For a moment Will only observed, yet before he could do more than note with concern the shadows of darkness beneath his young friend's eyes, Hannibal's hand froze and his head jerked up. Nostrils flaring, he regarded Will with something akin to resentment. Instinctively, Will stepped forward, but to his shock, Hannibal jerked his head back as if he had been slapped. Halting abruptly, Will took a shaky breath.

'Hannibal, what -'

'Hannibal, dearest!' Mischa Graham bustled into the room. The lace tuck of her elegant powder-blue gown was slightly askew, and long blonde strands of her upswept hair had drifted loose, pulled no doubt by the wriggling baby in her arms. 'Come and say hello to your niece.'

The spell was effectively broken. As the whole family piled in behind Mischa, Will retreated to the fireplace, head whirling with the realisation of what must have happened in his absence. For the delicious scent which pulled at his senses more insistently by the moment was undoubtedly coming from Hannibal. *More* than that - it was pouring off him in waves. But as Will struggled to regain control over even his speech, all around him appeared oblivious. Nothing, it seemed, was to interrupt the banal chatter of greetings and gossip. In disbelief, Will looked from person to person, yet all were behaving as if nothing at all of note had taken place. Save for Hannibal himself, whose determined nonchalance upon the arrival of his family could not disguise the ruddiness of his cheeks or the glitter of his gaze, darkened to burnt caramel when on occasion it strayed to Will.

'Come, Will. You have not yet held Hanna.' Anthony's cheerful urging jolted him from his brooding inertia, and with an effort he smoothed the frown from his brow and wandered across to the sofa where his brother held aloft his babbling niece.

'Indeed I have not. Come then, little one.' Lifting her from her father's arms, Will sat down beside him and balanced the child gingerly on his knees. 'It is time that you and I were properly acquainted.'

'What a picture of contentment.' Will stiffened as Hannibal materialised suddenly behind him, leaning over the back of the sofa. His voice was a seductive purr, his breath ruffling the hair at Will's nape, sending an uncontrollable shiver through him. 'One would never know to look at you now that you were capable of being at all quarrelsome.'

Here was a change indeed. Who was this provocative creature? Standing abruptly, Will turned and almost shoved the infant at Hannibal, who to his credit received her without hesitation.

‘You have always been able to control your self-indulgent inclinations where children are concerned, Hannibal. Could you but be as temperate in your dealings with adults, I am sure that you and I would think just alike.’

Their eyes locked, a strange charge passing between them that Will could not even begin to decipher. A moment later, the gong sounded for dinner, and Anthony reclaimed his babbling daughter from Hannibal’s lax hold. ‘Time for bed, young lady. Valentine, Florence, go with Nurse.’

The boys’ protestations were half-hearted - it had been a wearisome journey from London - and dutifully they trooped out. The rest of the party began filing into the hallway, bound for the dining parlour, and Will was grateful for the opportunity of a moment alone to calm his racing heart and tumultuous thoughts. To his alarm, however, Hannibal stopped in the doorway before him, effectively blocking it, and turned to face him.

‘How boring it would be if we always agreed.’ There it was again, that odd purr that would have better befitted a practised courtesan than the innocent boy whom Will had known all his life.

‘I could adapt to such boredom quite easily, if you would ever take note of my advice,’ Will replied stiltedly, forcing down his discomfiture. This was *Hannibal* after all, he reminded himself, not some stranger to be shied away from. Hannibal, whom he had watched grow up. Hannibal, for whom for years he had been mentor and confidant. Hannibal… Who stalked towards him now with a barely restrained wildness in his eyes, his movements loose-limbed and sensual.

‘How strange that our disagreements must always arise from *my* being in the wrong.’

Backing away until the table prevented him from going any further, Will replied tightly, ‘Little wonder, surely. I was, after all, sixteen years old when you were born.’ A reminder - for them both. Yet one which, it seemed, Hannibal was eager to dismiss.

‘One-and-twenty years have since passed,’ he murmured, closing the distance between them until they stood almost toe to toe. ‘You missed my birthday.’ And with a slow smile, ‘You owe me a present, I think.’

Dazedly, Will lifted a hand and cupped Hannibal’s cheek. It scorched his palm. ‘You are not well.’

‘I am perfectly well.’

Will smiled then, despite himself. ‘Certainly you are as contrary as ever.’ His hand fell away and he stepped to the side, ignoring Hannibal’s scowl. ‘But do not try to tell me that there is nothing amiss. The way that you are behaving - your scent -’

‘You have been *smelling* me?’ Outrage now in every line.

‘Hannibal, it has been difficult to avoid, despite your housekeeper's efforts.’ Gently, Will grasped his elbow and drew him back to the sofa, determinedly suppressing his own wayward reactions as the mentor within rose to the fore. ‘Come and sit with me for a moment.’

Despite his earlier forwardness, Hannibal held himself now with stiff dignity, and Will’s heart ached for him.

‘So, it has finally happened.’

‘Yes.’

‘How long?’

A dark gaze fastened on him. ‘A month.’

Shaking his head slightly, Will frowned. ‘I meant how long have you been in heat.’

‘I know,’ snapped Hannibal. ‘I repeat, a month.’

Will swallowed. ‘That is not possible.’ Without thinking, he laid his hand on Hannibal’s thigh, taut muscle hot beneath his touch. ‘Hannibal, it is my understanding that heats last for days - sometimes upwards of a week - but not -’

‘And precisely how many heats have *you* experienced?’

‘Well, I -’

Hannibal’s lip curled. ‘Do not presume to contradict me as if you understand this better than I.’

Concern overriding the instinct to snap back, Will pressed, ‘Then explain it to me so that I *do* understand.’

Hannibal’s gaze flicked down to where Will’s palm still rested, but before Will could move his hand away he found long, slim fingers covering his own.

‘I am sorry, Will. This is not your fault.’

Tenderly, Will brushed back a strand of golden-brown hair from his young friend’s brow, heart contracting. ‘Perhaps we should move past apologies, hm? Just tell me.’

‘It has been -’ Hannibal exhaled slowly. ‘Difficult. The symptoms have been erratic. From what Doctor Sutcliffe has told me, however, things should settle once this first heat is over.’

Cut to the quick by the pain that Hannibal could not disguise, Will cupped the supple line of his jaw, thumb smoothing across the jut of his cheekbone. ‘I, too, am sorry. I should not have stayed away for so long.’

Hannibal's fingers tightened over his, and he looked at Will with heart-wrenching helplessness, all defenses dropped. His next words were almost sobbed. 'Will, I do not know what to do.'

A powerful surge of protectiveness blended with self-reproach rendered Will momentarily silent; and when he did again speak, the words slipped out before he could prevent them.

'I know what to do. And I know what you need. I asked you once before, and now I ask you again. Let me help you, Hannibal, please.'

'You unmake me, quite.'

As the organised chaos of a large family dinner commenced, Hannibal paid little heed to the merry discourse which flowed around him. Where once he would have taken pains to conduct the conversation to best suit himself, now he sat silent, absently tapping at the curled toes of his roasted lark, replaying in his mind Will's husky request.

'Let me help you, Hannibal, please.'

His response at the time had been to stare in consternation - and more than a little confusion - at his friend and mentor, whose slow-growing flush had told of a mind equally conflicted; and only the repeated thrashing of the dinner gong had saved both from further blushes.

Now, as Mischa chattered about the news which Mr Franklyn had been so kind as to share with her party upon spying their carriage in the main street - the arrival of a letter from his niece Fredricka - it was all that Hannibal could do to retain the basics of her exuberant discourse, so preoccupied was he by what had occurred in the drawing room half an hour earlier.

'Dear Mr Franklyn has promised to read the letter to us when we call on him tomorrow,' said Mischa, with an enthusiasm clearly not shared by her husband, who groaned theatrically.

'Heavens above, we shall be there half the day!'

'Anthony,' she admonished, soup spoon halted in mid-air, 'Do not be so uncharitable. Mr Franklyn is too often alone. A daily visit while we are in the neighbourhood is the least we can offer.'

'*Daily?*'

Hannibal looked up then, for the horror in his brother-in-law's voice was almost comically amplified. His attention was retained by Will's interjection, his usually confident and laconic tones strangely muted.

'At least you have the promise of entertainment. Fredricka Lounds is a talented wordsmith, though admittedly her uncle's delivery does the text no great service.'

This would have amused Hannibal but for two factors: one, despite the fact that Anthony was sitting directly beside him, Will's gaze never once strayed from his brother to Hannibal; and two, Hannibal had long suspected Will of partiality for the winsome Fredricka, a fiery-haired Omega who visited her uncle but rarely, a state of affairs of which Hannibal disapproved strongly.

'Miss Lounds is a wordsmith indeed.' With swift strokes of his knife, Hannibal dissected his tiny fowl with barely a whisper of steel on bone china. 'I particularly admire her ability to transform the most mundane of happenings into an epic worthy of Milton.'

The awkward silence which followed was filled quickly by Robert, who launched into a convoluted tale of the time he had almost got his hands on a first edition of Paradise Lost, only to be beaten to it by an unscrupulous book dealer.

‘That was more than usually scathing of you.’

With everyone else engaged by Robert’s spirited oratory, Hannibal was contrarily discomfited to find himself once more the sole focus of Will’s attention. The Alphan scent which he had, for years, barely registered as anything other than lightly pleasing, teased now mercilessly at his senses, as it had from the moment Will had walked into the drawing room. Sweet meadowgrass, ripened after a summer storm. As fresh and unpretentious as the man himself. Yet each inhale scraped his senses raw. Rendered rational thought impossible. And stoked his resentment.

Blue eyes grave, Will leaned across the table, voice low. ‘Hannibal, talk to me.’

‘On what pretext?’ Reaching for his wine goblet, Hannibal forwent the pleasure of an initial savouring sniff, seeking instead the immediate distraction of fermented grape on his tongue. ‘To bury Miss Lounds or to praise her?’

‘Forget Fredricka Lounds.’

Hannibal raised his brows at the snap in Will’s tone. ‘I would that I could.’

Expecting to be unequivocally cut after that, Hannibal was unsurprised when Will pushed back his chair and vacated his seat without another word. He watched surreptitiously as Will stepped up to their host, bending to speak quietly to Robert, who nodded briefly before returning to his story. Hannibal was, however, *most* surprised when Will returned to stand beside him.

‘Come.’

‘I beg your -’

‘Now, if you please.’ Despite the quietness of the request, the look in Will’s eyes brooked no opposition. ‘You and I need to have a conversation.’

Out of respect for his uncle, and keen to avoid more attention than that which they had already garnered, Hannibal followed Will from the room and up the winding main staircase. Mind busily engaged in organising indignant phrases against such highhandedness, he scarcely realised until it was too late that Will had led him straight into his own bedchamber. And he had trailed behind.

Like a meek little Omega.

Disgusted with himself and resentful of Will’s presumptiveness, he stood by the closed door with hands clenched and mouth thinned in displeasure.

‘I do not recall replying favourably to your request for help. I do not recall replying at all.’

Will looked at him calmly, then turned and crossed the room. But towards the bay window, not the bed. Sitting down on the edge of the walnut window seat, he gestured for Hannibal to join him. ‘Please. I have no expectations, Hannibal. I simply wish to talk with you.’

It was with slight wariness that Hannibal took a seat beside him. In these confined quarters, Will’s scent was almost overwhelming, and although logic told him that the racing of his heart was mere biological imperative, he felt with dismay the impropriety of such a reaction towards his oldest and dearest friend.

‘Perhaps on reflection I should not be out in company, given my - situation.’

‘Hannibal.’

He looked down at the hand covering his own. Its warmth was both comforting and disconcerting, but despite his confusion he made no move to pull away. Instead, he attempted to marshall his thoughts into coherence.

‘Will, I would not have you think me ungrateful. On the contrary, I am deeply touched that you would be willing to - to -’

‘Hannibal, look at me.’

A simple request, yet it took a concerted effort to lift his eyes to those now of the gentlest blue.

‘You have been suffering for full a month.’

Hannibal bristled anew. At the description - at the *conversation*. Such indignity - such exposure - was not to be borne and he made as if to stand. ‘Suffering? I hardly think -’

A hand, firm around his wrist, stayed him. ‘Hannibal, it is evident in every line of your body. And it cannot go on. I trust that you have consulted with Doctor Sutcliffe.’

‘Of course.’

Will frowned. ‘I am surprised he did not recommend a suppressing tonic.’

‘He did.’ Hannibal’s mouth firmed. ‘I want none of them. I am, as you know, very careful about what I put into my body.’

Although he shook his head, Will’s eyes were full of affection. ‘I know that you are very stubborn.’

And suddenly, with one shared smile, the tension between them dissipated, replaced by their customary familiarity. Will released Hannibal’s wrist, but the Alpha’s other hand still lay atop his, and on impulse Hannibal turned his palm upward, interlacing their fingers. The assertiveness of this action pulled from Will a surprised huff, but no rebuffing move. Curious, still a little cautious, yet shedding his misgivings with every passing moment, Hannibal leaned a little towards his most cherished of friends. Moonlight streaming through the latticed

windows had tipped Will's lashes with silver and delineated each soft curl. How easy it was in this moment to imagine that it could happen. That it was actually possible.

'Perhaps -'

But the words died as their eyes met, and in the next instant a brush of lips rendered Hannibal quite incapable of further thought.

Perhaps it had been impulsive. But Will could not bring himself to regret the kiss when the boy on the other end of it grabbed the lapels of his coat and hauled him closer for another. This time, Will coaxed open the soft lips which had a habit of so infuriating him. Tentatively, he slipped the tip of his tongue inside, and was quite unprepared for the resulting rush of desire when Hannibal met him with a hungry lick. Will curled his fingers around Hannibal's jaw, registering with a pang the feverish dampness of his smooth skin.

'Easy,' he murmured. 'I will make it better, Hannibal, I promise.'

And when Hannibal whined deep in his throat, Will gathered the young Omega to him in a tight embrace, heart contracting with a tenderness that warned against the wisdom of this course. But Hannibal needed him, and so he pushed aside his reservations.

As if in a dream, he released his hold, stood up and held out his hand. 'Come.'

Slender fingers slid into his own, and he tugged Hannibal up. In silence, he led the boy over to the bed, the enormity of the moment making speech impossible; and when they stopped at the foot of the four-poster it was with trembling fingers that he began undressing Hannibal, who simply looked back at him with eyes grown dark and wild, as knots were untied and buttons loosed. The first glimpse of pale skin, unexpectedly dusted with golden hair, drew from Will a sigh. Dropping to his knees, he pushed from Hannibal's shoulders both coat and waistcoat, and watched with reverent awe as Hannibal grasped his shirt hem, pulling it up and off. The lean lines of his body, which retained still a hint of boyishness, were more beautiful than Will could have imagined. And it was with a start that he realised he had, in fact, been imagining this scenario for some time. He closed his eyes and allowed himself the indulgence of feathering kisses along Hannibal's trim waist, smiling to himself as the muscles contracted beneath his touch. His smile dimmed when hands settled in his hair and pushed him off, and he looked up, uncertain, reassured by the depth of desire in Hannibal's gaze yet puzzled nonetheless. Until Hannibal's hands moved to unbutton the front flap of his breeches and it fell open, exposing his straining sex.

'Touch me.'

Hannibal's eyes burned into his, and Will exhaled harshly. The potent scent of an Omega in heat demanded all of his Alphan attention. Despite the layers still between them, he could sense how slick the boy was, his own body responding instinctively to what he knew they both craved. Yet still he hesitated, for this was *Hannibal* after all. They had, over the last twenty-one years, been so many different things to each other: unofficial guardian and charge, teacher and student, and, for the past few years, the best of friends. The years separating them had hardly seemed to matter. Until now. And suddenly, Will felt every one of his thirty-seven years. Should he have found for Hannibal an Alpha of his own age? Was this

not, in fact, utter selfishness rather than the act of altruism he had persuaded himself he was performing? Did not Hannibal deserve to spend his first heat with a prospective mate rather than an old acquaintance? Perhaps Randall Tier would decide one day soon to grace the village with his presence, and then he and Hannibal - but even the idea of finishing the *thought* was anathema.

'Will.' Was that really Hannibal's voice? So gutteral, almost a snarl. 'If you truly wish to help me, then *touch* me.'

And in that moment, Will relinquished doubt and regret. Come what may, he had brought them both to this, and Hannibal needed him now. He swallowed, nodded, and finally reached out. How full - surprisingly so - was Hannibal's sex. Red and wet. And silky-firm beneath his fingers. He wanted to lean forward and caress the gleaming tip with his tongue, to taste for the first time the sweetness of an Omega. But this was not an experience to be rushed. Acutely aware of Hannibal's innocence, Will forced down the powerful instinct to *take* and determined instead to *give. Easing your guilty conscience,* his inner voice sneered. He ignored it.

'Lie down on the bed.'

For a moment, he almost expected protestation; but then, with a speed which under other circumstances might have been amusing, Hannibal kicked off his ornately-buckled shoes, pushed down his breeches, and stripped off his stockings with seemingly little care for the ripping sounds which accompanied his frantic motions. The sight of carelessly-discarded silk, muslin and velvet brought a lump of fondness to Will's throat. How rare to catch a glimpse behind the veil of rigid respectability and precise care. He felt keenly the privilege of it, and never more so than when, with a shy glance in his direction, Hannibal climbed onto the bed and lay back, the rapid rise and fall of his chest telling of his nervousness.

'Good. You are being so good for me.'

The soft praise fell from his lips with helpless ease. And as he too undressed, less hurriedly than his young friend yet with equal eagerness, his eyes never once left that lovely supine form.

'Will.' He hardly recognised that rasp of sound. 'You have - done this before?'

'I have.' Perhaps a dozen times over the years. Usually after a riotous London gathering. Occasionally to satisfy a rare rut. Never with the same person twice. And - 'Never with an Omega. But you must not worry. Pregnancy in the first few cycles is extremely rare. And there are ways -'

'Will, please.'

He stopped, chuckling wryly. 'My apologies. I forgot for a moment how prudish you are.'

'Oh really?' As if in taunt or challenge, Hannibal arched his back, raising his body in a curve from shoulders to hips. He looked at Will through his lashes. 'Prudish, you say?'

Such outrageous provocation, yet a betraying blush dusted cheekbones and chest. The combination was utterly delicious. And completely irresistible.

With a low growl, Will stripped off his shirt, and threw it onto the carpet with the rest of their clothing. Then naked, prowling, he mounted the bed and crawled up over Hannibal's body. Caging him in with his arms, Will lowered his head and scented hungrily the length of the boy's slender neck, across his clavicle, and down to nose at a dusky nipple.

'You smell divine. Fever-sweet.' He whispered the words against the tight bud before taking it into his mouth. He flicked his tongue across it, then latched on and sucked greedily, hands finding Hannibal's hair and threading through to hold still the whining boy.

'So do you. *Will.*'

A needful cry as Will dipped his hips and rubbed his erect member across Hannibal's.

'Open your legs.'

What delight as Hannibal did just that - delight made sweeter still for the fact that such unquestioning obedience was a rarity. Will pressed closer, rutting in mimicry of what was to come, allowing Hannibal to grow accustomed to the weight and feel of another body. Hannibal's mouth hung open in slack pleasure as he thrust up blindly, and Will relinquished the indulgence of suckling Hannibal's nipple to claim a long, deep kiss. When it ended, he rolled onto his side, taking Hannibal with him. Face to face now, though with hardly a gap between them, he lifted one hand to trail wonderingly from the slight dip of Hannibal's waist to one sharp hip bone. Then around, to smooth over peach-soft buttocks and trace the enticing cleft between.

'Oh, my poor boy,' he murmured, in truth hardly knowing what he was saying. 'You are so very wet for me.'

He slipped one finger deeper, to stroke gently across the slick entrance, only penetrating when Hannibal's fretful sounds told him that the Omega was ready. Moving his finger in and out with the greatest care, he kissed away Hannibal's impatient cries; and when he added another finger and found the raised bud within, he stroked it until they were both leaking with desperate need. They rolled again until Hannibal was once more beneath him, and Will sat back on his knees, breathing harshly. Rough in his desire, he grasped Hannibal's narrow hips and pulled him down the bed so that his legs straddled Will's waist. Eyes of molten amber stared him down, and it was without hesitation that he took himself in hand and slid within that tight heat. Although he knew that Omegan anatomy was designed for this - that apparently hardly any preparation at all was necessary - he stilled immediately upon hearing Hannibal gasp.

'I am sorry, I should not have -'

Sweat-slippy fingers encircled his forearm. 'Do not you *dare* stop.'

Ah, there was his autocratic boy. And the next moment, it was Will's turn to gasp as Hannibal released him and began a slow, experimental circling of his hips.

‘Hannibal,’ he breathed, spreading his palms across the boy’s chest, thumbs strumming gently over the slight mounds topped with such temptingly pert nipples. The stimulation of his own swollen sex was unlike any sensation he had ever experienced. And when Hannibal actually *squeezed* around him, he seized those wriggling hips and drove in deep and hard.

The dominant part of him gloried as Hannibal threw back his head and cried out, hands splayed on the bed, fingers curling into the quilt and tugging until the fragile material threatened to rip. Will panted with pleasure as his knot swelled, and groaned with the deepest satisfaction when Hannibal pushed forward to take him entire. They rocked together, tied in the most intimate way possible. Alpha and Omega. And with his face pressed to the damp hollow of Hannibal’s throat, Will shuddered his release in wave after euphoric wave.

‘Oh, oh.’ Eyes narrowed to slits, hands clutching at him fretfully, Hannibal remained beautifully aroused. The stickiness on Will’s belly was a sweet reminder of the relief that he had promised, and on a sated sigh he lifted his head.

‘Hush. I know.’ He pressed a kiss to full lips bitten red. ‘You need to let go.’ And with a slow smile at the glare he received in return, Will reached down to take into his hand that wonderful weight. Eyes fixed on Hannibal’s, he stroked firmly, using the ample slick between them to create an exquisite slide. And as Hannibal’s breathing again harshened, eyes dilated to polished onyx, Will worked him with tender persistence. ‘Come,’ he coaxed. ‘I want to see you come.’

Hannibal made a noise somewhere between anguish and delight, and Will crooned to him as warm wetness pumped over his fist.

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At some point, Hannibal had fallen asleep. He had collapsed back onto the bed, shuddering in the aftershocks of rapture, and Will had followed, mindful of their joining, wrapping his arms around Hannibal’s waist, anchoring them together. There had been a vague thought of fetching water and a cloth as soon as practically possible - and then a wonderful sense of peace, of contentment, as he had drifted into slumber.

Awakening was gradual, a careful cataloguing of sensations. The terrible restlessness that had plagued him for weeks had gone; in its place was the most delightful languor. A slight soreness as well, but of a most pleasant nature. He yawned and blinked sleepily - it was now full dark and for a moment he thought the room empty. Had Will left him? Returned to Lupus Hall with his family, obligation discharged? The idea was not a pleasing one; but even as Hannibal prepared to be gravely offended, a noise in the adjoining washroom betrayed the presence of another.

He sat up, the blanket which in the night Will must have draped over them both pooling at his waist, eyes trained expectantly on the door. Moments later, it opened to reveal Will, skin damp and hair glistening, unabashedly naked, carrying a basin and jug. Muslin towels were draped over his arm but they concealed nothing of his splendid physique. And Hannibal felt immediately the impact of the Alpha’s presence: skin heating, muscles tightening with instinctive expectation, slick tricking again between his thighs. *Is this what it is to be a slave to one’s instincts?*

He must have betrayed something of his perturbation, for Will set the water-filled jug carefully on the floor, placed the bowl and towels at the end of the bed, and came to kneel beside Hannibal, all gentle concern. He laid the flat of his hand against Hannibal's forehead.

'How are you feeling?'

'I am quite recovered.' The urge to lean into that touch, to close even this slight distance between them and press close, was strong. *But you are stronger. You are no mindless Omega, doomed to dependency on an Alpha for fulfilment.* Yet the fingers stroking through his hair weakened his resolve. 'The fever has abated.'

'For the moment, yes.'

His eyelids fluttered closed. 'What do you mean?'

He felt a warm sigh against his forehead, followed by the whisper of a kiss. 'You are still in heat, Hannibal. Until we have been together several times, it will not recede.'

The idea that what had just occurred between them would by necessity be repeated over and over sent a strange tremor through him. But Hannibal attempted nonchalance nonetheless.

'Will not you be missed if you remain here with me?'

'Not at all.' Will's tone was light as he toyed absently with loose strands of hair, pushing them back out of Hannibal's face. 'Anthony will delight in taking charge of the Hall for a few days.'

Days? And...

'Do they know?' His face burned at the prospect.

Will's hand stilled and his brow wrinkled. 'Hannibal, this is not something to be ashamed of.'

Hannibal pulled back slightly. 'When you spoke to my uncle -'

'I told him no specifics, though I believe it has relieved his mind greatly to know that you are not alone in this time of trial. And as for Anthony and Mischa, they are your family too, Hannibal. Be assured, no one is feeling anything but concern for you.' The earnestness of Will's regard was convincing. Still…

'I had thought myself - other.'

'Dormant.'

'Yes.' His eyes flicked to Will's. 'This will be - an adjustment.'

'Which I shall help you with.' A note of sensuality had entered Will's voice, sending a shiver through Hannibal.

'Every year?'

But Will seemed suddenly rather preoccupied with tracing patterns in the scarlet quilt. ‘A year is a long time, Hannibal. Much can change. Best perhaps to think only of the here and now.’

Cold trickled down Hannibal’s spine. This was not the first time Will had hinted at a future that precluded the occupants of Hartwell.

‘You are right, of course.’

He despised the slight unevenness of his tone, but in the next moment he was successfully diverted by Will’s hand on his thigh.

‘I should like to tend to you now. You will sleep more comfortably.’

Sleep was suddenly the furthest thing from Hannibal’s mind.

‘Later.’ Rising to his knees, he wound his arms around Will’s neck, shifting until they were once again skin-to-skin, pressed close from chest to belly. ‘Presently I am in need of a different sort of tending.’

‘Are you, now?’ The amusement in Will’s voice was belied by the dark flash in his eyes and the way that his hands took immediate possession of Hannibal’s hips.

‘Mm.’ Hannibal reached between them and stroked greedily Will’s growing arousal. How quickly he felt his own need burgeoning, his body responding instinctively to Will’s moans and sighs. Almost without thinking, he lifted himself slightly, positioned the now-rigid head at his entrance and sank down until he was seated fully in Will’s lap, thighs clamped either side of Will’s waist.

‘*Hannibal.*’ The press of Will’s mouth to the curve of his neck, just above his mating gland, prompted a fresh gush of slick that coated them both and made the push and slide exquisite. ‘You unmake me, quite.’

Hot satisfaction spurred Hannibal to move faster, to grind down harder, his own sex trapped between them. Clutching tightly, nails digging into Will’s nape in involuntary search for relief, he gloried in the Alpha’s groans and the tight clasp of fingers urging him on. *Alpha.* Not his, yet at this present moment *wholly* his. This confusion of thoughts was interrupted by a tongue licking roughly across his nipple, and scattered completely when its twin was taken between sharp teeth and grazed oh, so lightly.

With a sound that he would have denied resoundly as resembling anything as uncouth as a snarl, Hannibal pushed at Will’s shoulders, unbalancing him so that he landed on his back with a soft huff of surprise.

‘No.’ Taking Will’s hand, he dragged it across his abdomen to press firmly against the heat of his erect flesh. ‘Touch me here. Now.’

Will’s response was a wolfish grin, his other hand moving in a feather-light caress from hip to waist and back again, soothing and tantalising. ‘You liked that, hm?’

Eyes narrowing, Hannibal ground his hips down in retaliation, and clenched until the smirk was lost to a loud groan, and nails dug involuntarily into his flesh. He hissed in satisfaction at the sting.

'*Now,* Alpha.'

The reflexive grip around him, the eyes like storm-tossed seas pinning him in place as he was worked mercilessly, ripped from him a cry of pure ecstasy, and his vision blurred as he spilled helplessly over and over. Within moments, Will arched up beneath him, pushing his burgeoning knot inside and shuddering to his own completion.

The tight pressure of Will's knot drew from Hannibal a second, impossible wave of creamy release. He bowed over Will's body, panting harshly, and went willingly when hands now gentle in languid aftermath pulled him close.

Once more he succumbed to sleep, and was roused only by the weak winter sunlight casting its faint glow across the bed. No need this time to wonder where Will was, and he gazed thoughtfully for some minutes at the dark head pillowed on his stomach and the arm slung loosely across his middle. Getting up was a notion that held suddenly little appeal; and before he again closed his eyes, he sought Will's hand with his own.

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Not for more years than he cared to remember had Will woken up in the same bed as another human being. And although two days and nights had passed, the novelty of the situation was still fresh. Two days and nights. Of passionate lovemaking - no matter why this had started, he could not think of it as anything less - of speaking little, sleeping much and eating irregularly despite Mrs Gideon's frequent deliveries of laden trays to their door. And waking yet again to the sight of his fingers laced with another's prompted a feeling of fierce possessiveness.

You must face up to it. Never have you felt this way before. You claimed to be doing this to help him when really you were helping yourself.

It was a sobering and shaming realisation.

When Hannibal had spoken of his heat a year hence, what fierce yearning had gripped Will. And what outrage at the idea that he would by then in all probability have been supplanted. Yet he had hinted at such an outcome and received no assurance in return... He sighed softly and banished the gloomy thoughts from his mind. Better by far to just enjoy their present closeness while it lasted.

There was a tap at the door, and Will lifted his head from its comfortable resting place. Another first, to feel so at ease with a bedfellow that his natural instinct was to sprawl all over them. He could only hope that Hannibal would not be appalled by such liberty-taking once his heat haze had dissipated.

'Thank you,' he called out quietly, though evidently not quietly enough. For the lithe form beneath him stirred, the fingers tangled with his twitching to life before slipping free.

‘What is it?’

Hair spilling across his forehead, amber eyes soft and sleepy, Hannibal appeared all at once terribly young, and Will’s heart clenched. He leaned down and brushed a kiss across lips temptingly half-parted, unable to resist a quick taste of the sweetness within.

‘Breakfast, I would think,’ he murmured, tension easing when Hannibal’s arms snaked around his waist. Instinctively, he returned the embrace. ‘Has your appetite yet returned?’

‘Some.’

Hannibal’s voice was muffled, face pressed to Will’s neck. And Will’s arms tightened around him fractionally before he eased back.

‘I am glad to hear it.’ One more kiss and he sat up, ridiculously pleased when Hannibal released him with evident reluctance.

Although retreating footsteps could be heard, for the sake of propriety and the chance of a servant passing, Will hunted for his breeches and pulled them on before opening the bedroom door. As predicted, on the other side he found a tray on which was spread a goodly variety of cold cuts, cheese, eggs, bread and fruit. Enough to suffice them until supper time, at least. A silver pot and two teacups completed the repast. Will sniffed the steam rising from the pot with appreciation.

‘Hot chocolate today. Is this your usual morning beverage or is Mrs Gideon spoiling us?’

In the act of buttoning his own breeches, Hannibal stopped and tilted his head consideringly. ‘I confess I have indulged rarely.’

‘Then this is a treat indeed.’ Glancing at the wreck of a bed, which had been the location of their previous meals, Will cleared a space on the carpet with his foot and set the tray down. ‘We shall eat here, I think.’

‘Really, Will.’ Mouth pursed, Hannibal set to gathering up their clothing, shaking out each item and draping them over the back of a chair.

‘I should not bother. They are mostly ruined.’

Will’s tone was mild; but as he settled on the carpet, legs stretched out in front of him, he felt a pang at the sudden return to orderliness. And not only that. Hannibal’s eyes were now clear, his complexion no longer dewy and reddened by fever. His heat had receded, more quickly than Will could have anticipated; and while he was glad for Hannibal’s sake, a small and selfish part of him mourned the approaching loss of the closeness they had shared.

It is for the best. You are his mentor, not his mate.

Still, as they ate in a silence that was distinctly subdued, he found himself hoarding greedily minute details: the precise way in which Hannibal buttered his bread, frowning in concentration as if he were an artist daubing a canvas; the flick of pink tongue catching crumbs; the occasional sweep of a hand through tawny hair, pushing it back and off his face.

Every movement graceful, controlled. A stark contrast to the wild, demanding thing who had writhed in his lap the night before. Hannibal's scent, rich and sweet, lingered still although it was fading in intensity. But having bloomed at last, it would now be forever a part of him. And Will knew that he would never be able to catch it without recalling these days that they had spent together.

'You are very quiet, Will.'

'As are you.' Will poured the chocolate, intent on his task. 'Perhaps there is nothing that needs saying.' *Or too much.*

'Perhaps.'

They sipped slowly, eyeing each other over the rims of their cups. *Who will give way first? And why is it ever a battle between us?*

'My heat has ended.'

The almost-accusing tone was endearingly reassuring. *He, too, does not wish for this to be over.*

'Yes, I know.'

'Then we should send for Gideon. Have a bath drawn and fresh clothes laid out.'

The words were delivered with such a scowl, they pulled from Will a fond smile and he set aside his cup.

'Hannibal.' Softly. And when Hannibal only stared mulishly into his cup, 'I have another suggestion.'

'Indeed?'

But Will was not deterred by his haughtiness. 'Mm hm.' Rising to his knees, he reached across for Hannibal's cup and plucked it from his fingers. 'Come here, if you please.'

Before Hannibal had time to do more than huff in apparent umbrage, Will had tugged him into his arms and down onto the carpet, miraculously missing the chocolate pot but sending the tray skidding across the floor.

'Will Graham, you are incorrigible.'

Breathless, reluctant laughter lurking in eyes now warm gold, cheeks flushed but only from healthy exertion, Hannibal looped his arms around Will's neck and tilted his face. And oh, how very willingly was his silent demand met. As their lips touched, Will closed his eyes and inhaled hungrily the mingled scents of sweet chocolate and Hannibal. Tasted them on his tongue and dipped deeper in slow exploration. When he broke away, already half-hard and feeling the evidence of Hannibal's own arousal against his hip, he licked his lips and pretended serious consideration.

‘Hannibal Lecter, *you* are delicious. And I do not intend to let you up again until I have had my fill of you.’

Liar. For you know now that never *will you have had enough of him.*

And that was his last coherent thought for some considerable time.

'He deserves a good thrashing.'

‘Snow? On the day of the Brock Hall Christmas party? My dearest Mischa, the heavens would not dare!’

‘Are you certain, Anthony? Doctor Sutcliffe seemed so sure when I met him in the apothecary’s this morning.’

‘Doctor Sutcliffe is not the font of all wisdom, you know,’ commented Hannibal as he strolled into the drawing room.

The heads of both his sister and brother-in-law turned in unison, and Mischa broke from her vigil by the window to walk rapidly forward and take Hannibal’s hands in her own. Her squeezing grip was reassuring, her expression at once anxious and hopeful.

‘Hannibal, dear, it is so good to see you downstairs. Are you to accompany us to the Crawfords’?’

Anthony threw Hannibal a look of apology. ‘Of course he is. Miss one of Jack’s famous gatherings? Unthinkable!’

Hannibal smiled briefly and stepped back, grateful when his sister released him without demur. ‘Quite. In any case, I am now quite well.’ Even this vague allusion to his heat felt indelicate. More even than that - it was like a betrayal of the intimacy that he and Will had shared.

Anthony, meanwhile, had rung the bell for their hats and outerwear to be brought. And it was with relief that Hannibal accepted his greatcoat, donned his high-crowned hat, pulled on his gloves and offered his arm to his sister.

‘Shall we?’

Despite Anthony’s earlier dismissal of Doctor Sutcliffe’s forecast, It could not be denied that the sky was heavy with portentous clouds as they drove through Balmore. Mischa cast several anxious upward glances through the window, prompting her husband to reassure her with a pledge of returning home, should more than a few flakes fall.

Hannibal heard this with some annoyance. Since Will’s departure two days since, the prospect of reuniting with him at Brock Hall had been the principle motivating factor in his determination to resume his normal life and duties. Will Graham: mentor, friend, emotional anchor. And, for three unforgettable days, lover. Until his heat had faded and Will had left him with a gentle kiss and a promise to seek him out at the Crawfords’ annual Christmas gathering. Of course, Hannibal had mused at the time, it was very likely that their biologically-driven passions would by then have dissipated; but that outcome, he had decided, would be perfectly acceptable. Welcome, even. Desires of the flesh seemed to lead inevitably to desires of the heart, and that left one vulnerable, as his poor mother had discovered to her cost. Better, surely, to be ruled by reason alone. Yet from almost the

moment Will had left him, Hannibal had been plagued by a curious ache in the pit of his stomach. And a restlessness that he had somehow known would only be calmed by the presence of his best friend. He had thus made up his mind to attend the party at all costs.

Still, he was a little unsettled to discover, upon walking into the marbled grand foyer of Brock Hall, that he was immediately able to discern the sweetness of meadow grass over all the other Alpha scents present. Fortunately, Mr Chilton's sudden materialisation provided an excellent distraction.

'Ah, Mr Chilton, you will be anxious to hear why Miss Hobbs is not among the company tonight,' he said in a hushed tone, tugging the Alpha into an alcove and loosing the curtains to partially obscure them before they could be prevailed on to enter the throng.

'I am, of course, *most* anxious.' In point of fact, Mr Chilton's stare seemed rather more lascivious than anxious, but that Hannibal attributed to the ardency of the man's feelings for Abigail.

He placed a consolatory hand on Mr Chilton's arm. 'The Misses Verger-Bloom conveyed a message to Hartwell this morning that Miss Hobbs is indisposed with a cold. She is not in any danger; however, her condition has precluded her attendance here tonight.'

To his credit, Mr Chilton looked horrified at the thought. 'Attend tonight, when she could very well be infectious? Out of the question!'

The odd wording of this exclamation prompted a frown, and Hannibal would have drawn away; but in the next moment, one of the curtains was flung back and there stood Will, a ferocious scowl on his face.

'You are missed, sirs,' he bit out. 'Mr Crawford wishes to make his toast.' And without giving either of them a chance to respond, he spun on his heel and strode away.

Two things struck Hannibal simultaneously: first, the sight of Will with his ink-black hair combed austerely back from his face, new blue coat with velvet trim fastened snugly above a waistcoat of cream silk, set his heart thudding with dismaying rapidity; second, such unaccountable rudeness smarted more than he would have thought possible. It could not go unanswered.

Yet the moment he stepped into the drawing room, a rather red-faced Mr Chilton at his heel, Hannibal was drawn aside by Anthony.

'Will is in the most fearful humour. What the devil were you two doing behind that curtain?'

'Anthony, really.' Hannibal glared at his smirking brother-in-law. 'I shall not dignify that question with a response.' He looked to the far end of the room where Will stood with a whisky in his hand in quiet conference with Mischa, and looked quickly away again. Judging by the rigid set of Will's shoulders, perhaps now was not the best moment for a confrontation. He cast about for another topic. 'I was led to believe that Mr Crawford was about to make a toast. Have I missed it?'

A large hand clapped him on the shoulder, and Jack Crawford's voice boomed genially in his ear. 'Never fear, Hannibal. You are right on time.'

On time or not, it was of little consequence, for Hannibal heard not a word of his host's pre-dinner speech, so preoccupied was he by the recollection of the look in Will's eyes when he had thrown back the curtain and his gaze had fallen to Hannibal's hand on Mr Chilton's arm. Stronger than anger, deeper than disappointment.

How could he have thought that I would…

'He has taken quite the fancy to you.'

'I beg your pardon?' Feeling himself flush, and annoyed by his own gauche reaction, Hannibal turned admonishing eyes on Anthony. 'Are you so bored this evening that you must invent stories to while away the time? Of course, I am most grateful for the aid he offered during my heat, but I can assure you that under normal circumstances, Will would never -'

'Will?' Anthony laughed, a trifle uneasily. 'You mistake me, Hannibal. I am speaking of Mr Chilton.'

Confusion warred with disbelief, and disbelief won out. Hannibal stared at his brother-in-law with open scorn. 'Mr Chilton, have a fancy for *me*? That is an even more ridiculous notion. He and I are on friendly terms, nothing more.'

'And does Mr Chilton know that?' It was Will, all biting derision. He threw them both a withering glance and stalked past them into the dining room before Hannibal could summon a retort.

The situation was not improved by the commencement of dinner. Hannibal found himself seated opposite Will, which was customary and, heretofore, a welcome arrangement; and on his left, elbow jabbing into his more than once, was Mr Chilton. One glowered; the other simpered. Neither state of affairs was at all satisfactory, and Hannibal made a fervent mental note to stay at home for the foreseeable future.

He did, however, wish most heartily to disabuse Will of the mistaken impression he had gained from the unfortunate curtain incident. And with that in mind, Hannibal turned a gracious smile on Mr Chilton.

'I shall be visiting Miss Hobbs the day after tomorrow. When should I tell her to expect you?'

'Expect me?' Mr Chilton looked at him blankly.

'You will be anxious, I am sure, to pay her a visit as soon as your duties allow,' pressed Hannibal.

At this, Mr Chilton's brow cleared. 'Ah yes, of course. It is indeed my duty to visit the sick over Christmas. You may tell Miss Hobbs that I, too, shall call on her the day after tomorrow. Perhaps,' he added casually, 'we might go together.'

This prompted a rude snort from Will.

‘Perhaps,’ hedged Hannibal, having no intention of allowing any such thing.

Over the course of the meal, Mr Chilton had shifted so far to the right as to be now in very real danger of falling off his chair, and consequently his thigh was pressing into Hannibal’s in a manner that was less than seemly. Good manners prevented him from rising, but such a drastic course became thankfully unnecessary when, of his own volition and in some haste, Mr Chilton moved back to his original station. The idea suddenly presented itself of another having had a hand in this turnabout when Hannibal glanced at Will and caught him staring at Mr Chilton in a way that could only be described as downright menacing.

Before he could give sufficient thought to the implications of this, words came drifting on the air which proved exceedingly effective in diverting him: ‘Randall’, ‘letter’ and ‘January’.

‘Forgive me, but I could not help overhearing.’ Turning his back on Mr Chilton, Hannibal addressed Mr Crawford down the length of the table. ‘Is there news from Mr Tier?’

‘Indeed there is,’ beamed Mr Crawford. He and his wife exchanged fond smiles. ‘My sister is thankfully well on the road to recovery, and Randall hopes to be with us shortly after the New Year.’

‘I look forward to meeting him at last.’

Will heard this pronouncement with sharp displeasure. How inexplicable to him was the village’s fascination with a former resident whom none save the most elder among them remembered. And of all the interest generated, it was Hannibal’s that grated most of all.

Because you know that they are well-suited, both in age and situation. Far more well-suited than you and he…

What a disappointment this evening was turning out to be. And yet he had looked forward to it with such anticipation, eager to know how Hannibal was faring, and hopeful that their reunion would dissipate the feeling of hollowness that had grown with every hour since their parting.

The after-dinner gathering brought Will little relief. Despite the change of venue from dining room to drawing room, the chief topic of conversation did not vary. Randall Tier’s letter was requested, sent for, brought in on a silver platter and passed around the party to be admired universally. Resigned to the tedium of listening ad nauseum to highlighted passages which, in his considered opinion, demonstrated a style both florid and self-aggrandising, Will settled into a corner armchair to seethe.

He could feel their eyes on him. Mischa, puzzled. Anthony, exasperated. Jack, speculative. And Hannibal. Hannibal, who only two days since had woken him with eager kisses, eyed him now from across the room with a mixture of wariness and resentment. Granted, Will told himself as he stared broodingly into the fire, he could have dealt better with the Mr Chilton situation. Reason told him that Hannibal had no interest in the obnoxious clergyman other than as a potential mate for his friend, Miss Hobbs. But the sight of Hannibal’s slender fingers resting on the arm of another Alpha had enraged him - and then to watch that same Alpha attempt to rub his objectionable scent onto Hannibal had been more than Will could

stomach. It mortified him to acknowledge it. He had ever despised displays of jealousy in others, particularly when those concerned were posturing Alphas. To have fallen prey to such behaviour himself was utterly insupportable. Yet here he was.

‘Your silence is speaking volumes, big brother.’

Declining to turn his eyes from the fire, Will shrugged. ‘I leave idle chatter to other people. You know that.’

‘Hm.’ Anthony grabbed a nearby footstool and seated himself at Will’s side. He leaned towards him, speaking low, his tone slightly reproving. ‘I know that you have been like a bear ever since you returned from Hartwell, and that you have several times tonight looked as if you would like to smite Mr Chilton with one blow.’

‘You do not know what you are talking about,’ replied Will sharply, looking up at last. ‘Go and bother someone else, would you?’

Anthony merely smirked, and the reason for this became quickly apparent. ‘Ah, Hannibal. Do come and cheer up my brother, would you? He is else not fit for company tonight.’

Hannibal, clutching two empty wine glasses and evidently heading past them towards the drinks table, hesitated mid-stride, and Will’s stomach clenched.

Am I now so repugnant to him?

‘Here.’ Rising, Anthony held out his hands. ‘Allow me to refill your glass. I assume the other is Jack’s? I shall take it back to him - I have hardly had an opportunity of speaking with him all evening.’

Face set in as forbidding an expression as he could muster, Will observed covertly as Hannibal surrendered the goblets, took a seat on the sofa opposite and, moments later, accepted his newly-filled glass with a murmur of thanks. With a cheeky wink which Will resoundingly ignored, Anthony sauntered away.

Meanwhile, Hannibal was studying his wine with determined intent.

‘Is the Madeira not to your liking?’ Will made no attempt to keep the chill from his voice. ‘I hear it is Mr Tier’s favourite.’

‘What is that to me?’ Hannibal lifted disdainful eyes.

Driven by hurt and frustration, Will pushed on. ‘And judging by the amount Mr Chilton has imbibed this evening, I would venture to say that he too has a keen appreciation of it.’

Hannibal’s lip curled. ‘I see you are determined to attach my preferences to theirs, despite the fact that the former gentleman I have yet to meet, and the other you know very well I intend for Miss Hobbs.’

‘Even though he himself has quite different ideas?’

‘He has no such thing.’

‘Oh, come now,’ scoffed Will, an edge to his voice that he could not control. ‘After the way he has fawned all over you tonight, how can you doubt it?’

‘How can you doubt *me*?’ Hannibal lashed back. ‘Do you believe that I have enjoyed his attentions?’

‘Perhaps not.’ Will’s eyes narrowed. ‘But you are reckless, Hannibal. You act impulsively, as if the people around you exist solely for your entertainment and convenience.’

For a moment, Hannibal looked as if he had been struck, but the next moment he lifted his chin and his eyes hardened. ‘It seems you think me quite the narcissist. Tell me, Will, was *convenience* the reason I invited you into my bed?’

Every line of his body was tense with repudiation. Yet behind that proud demeanour, Will sensed a bleakness that tore at his heart.

He is your best friend. What are you doing?

Softening, he exhaled harshly and leaned forward, elbows on his knees, hands clasped loosely before him. ‘I cannot say, Hannibal. I wonder if you yourself even know.’

Setting aside his untouched glass, Hannibal shifted closer until he mirrored Will’s pose, his amber gaze earnest. ‘I know that this evening has not unfolded as I would have wished it to.’

‘Oh?’

But as Will’s heart leapt in sudden hope, a mottle-faced Mr Chilton appeared between them and sat down heavily beside Hannibal, drink sloshing as he landed with some awkwardness.

‘I have been considering Miss Hobbs’ pitiable situation,’ he slurred. ‘It concerns me greatly.’

Will found himself immediately on the receiving end of a triumphant look from Hannibal. ‘Dear Mr Chilton, of course it does. You are, after all, invested in the matter.’

‘Exactly. Promise me, then,’ urged Mr Chilton, turning to Hannibal in sombre entreaty, ‘that you will stay far away from the Verger-Blooms’ school until the contagion has been eradicated.’

Despite all that had come before, Will could have laughed aloud at the look of dismay which crossed Hannibal’s face at this.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘You spend far too much time thinking of others while putting yourself at risk.’ Mr Chilton shook his head sorrowfully and shuffled closer. ‘It really will not do. Mr Graham, I am sure that you will support me in advising Mr Lecter against paying Miss Hobbs any more visits for the foreseeable future.’

Suddenly, the evening had taken a distinctly entertaining turn. ‘Certainly I shall. Mr Lecter,’ said Will, with mock-seriousness, ‘pray listen to your friend. And this time,’ he added with soft emphasis, ‘hear what he is saying.’

He imagined that he could almost hear Hannibal’s teeth gnashing. ‘I am obliged to you both, but I will not abandon Miss Hobbs on account of a trifling cold.’

‘It seems a hopeless case.’ Mr Chilton turned mournful eyes on Will. ‘Yet have not I some right to complain?’

Much of Will’s amusement promptly dissipated. ‘Only Mr Lecter can answer that question.’

Hannibal’s eyes flashed with the promise of a fiery riposte, but at that moment Mischa’s squeal of alarm caused all eyes to turn to the window where she stood, holding back the velvet drapes.

‘See how much snow has settled? And it is falling still!’

Flecks of white thudded dully against the panes, painting out the night with worrying rapidity. But a quick trip to the front door reassured Will that there was no danger of the party being snowed in. The drive, although covered lightly, was still perfectly passable, and on returning to the drawing room he imparted as much. Mischa, however, anxious to get home to the children as quickly as possible, sent for her pelisse and the carriage.

‘Will, you cannot possibly return to Lupus Hall on foot tonight,’ pronounced Robert Lecter firmly.

‘I agree.’ Jack turned to Will. ‘You may stay with us tonight.’

But at this, Mischa interjected. ‘Perhaps, Will, you would not mind accompanying us in our carriage? You are so calm in a crisis. And you are, in any case, to spend Christmas with us tomorrow. Hannibal, you could follow in Mr Chilton’s carriage, if he would oblige you?’

Predictably, Mr Chilton was all too happy to agree to this arrangement. Hannibal looked rather offended by his sister-in-law’s relegation, and decidedly put out at the prospect of his new travelling companion. But, reasoned Will, there was very little harm that could come of a ten minute drive to Mr Chilton’s door. And this new scheme held the promise of time alone with Hannibal later, when perhaps they might finally address the changed status of their relationship and all of its thorny implications.

And so it was with a wicked grin that he saluted Hannibal and the swaying figure of Mr Chilton from the window of the Hartwell carriage. Whatever came to pass, Hannibal was more than capable of handling himself. And it was past time he learned that meddling in the affairs of others more often than not resulted in less than desirable consequences.

Watching the carriage depart, Hannibal was struck by a thoroughly childish urge to ball up some snow and hurl it at the window through which Will was still smirking. But wine-soaked breath on the back of his neck reminded him of a more pressing problem. With reluctance, he trudged towards Mr Chilton’s modest carriage, climbed in and settled himself with his back

to the driver, reasoning that the instinctive position to seat oneself in once aboard was the side opposite. As an added measure, he placed his hat on the adjacent cushion, and was greatly relieved when Mr Chilton did not, as he had feared, attempt to sit beside him, but fell into the unoccupied seat with a tipsy giggle. The Crawfords smiled and waved from the doorway, blissfully unaware of the mortifying turn the evening had taken. And with a signal to the driver, they were off.

It would have satisfied Hannibal to proceed in silence, but unfortunately Mr Chilton was not quite drunk enough to be lulled to sleep by the motion of the carriage. In fact, after the third jarring bump over what were presumably snow-covered stones on the road, he sat bolt upright and gazed at Hannibal with discomfiting intensity.

‘Your scent is divine. It revives me quite,’ he declared at length.

Scandalised, Hannibal compressed his lips and turned to face the window. This proved to be a mistake, however, as moments later he found his hand seized and his would-be suitor professing undying love.

‘Perhaps my attentions tonight have been too marked,’ he sighed, clinging on to Hannibal’s hand with great determination, ‘but when I heard last week that you had cloistered yourself away - presumably in heat - I knew that I must lay bare my heart to you and inform you that never again will you be forced to suffer alone.’

With great hauteur, Hannibal wrenched away his hand. ‘Mr Chilton, return to your seat. And kindly refrain from such discussion. If even you were now addressing Miss Hobbs, it would not be seemly.’

‘Miss Hobbs?’ Mr Chilton appeared perplexed. ‘Why, pray, would I wish to discuss any such thing with *her*?’

His tone was so dismissive, it caused Hannibal’s temper to rise exponentially, and his next words were borne more out of indignation on behalf of his friend than wisdom.

‘Perhaps because you have been courting her these past several months.’

‘*Courting* her? Courting *her*?’ Mr Chilton now looked positively apoplectic, though he did retreat finally to his former seat. ‘That is the most preposterous - not to say *slanderous* idea. That I could ever lower myself to -’

‘Mr Chilton, you forget yourself, ‘ growled Hannibal. ‘Miss Hobbs is a gentlewoman and you will mind your language when speaking of her.’

‘That is the point! I do not wish to speak of her!’ exclaimed Mr Chilton. ‘Who *would* wish to speak of Miss Hobbs when Mr Lecter is near? Miss Hobbs,’ he snorted. ‘I can, I think, hope for better than *that*. I am not so without means that I would abandon my most cherished wish - to marry an Omega, and one of at least equal standing to myself.’

It was on the tip of Hannibal’s tongue to protest that Miss Hobbs was, in his opinion, a Dormant Omega; but he had been wrong about so much lately, it occurred to him that perhaps

he had been wrong about that too. So he remained silent. Meanwhile, Mr Chilton's face had taken on a most unflattering, sullen expression.

'Am I to take it, then, that you have no interest in -'

'Absolutely none.'

Hannibal spoke with more fervour than he had intended, and thus abruptly put an end to further discourse. Both sat in frozen silence for the remainder of the journey, and when at last the carriage pulled up outside the vicarage, Mr Chilton alighted with speed and a mumbled 'Goodnight to you, sir.'

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With what weariness of spirit did Hannibal walk through the front door of Hartwell. Time was needed for reflection, but the sound of Mozart drifting from the drawing room reminded him of his duties as host. He would have recognised anywhere that lightness of touch; and despite the ordeal which he had just escaped, his lips curved upwards at the sight of Will at the harpsichord. No one else had yet dared try it. But Will seemed to know instinctively how to handle the temperamental instrument. HIs head was bent in concentration as his long fingers flew over the keys, dark lashes feathering his cheeks, a stray curl falling across his brow; and in a moment of breathless appreciation, Hannibal thought that he had never seen a sight more beautiful. He remained silent until the final note was played, then walked forward, applauding.

Will looked up swiftly, blushed becomingly and stood up with a mock bow.

'Hannibal, thank goodness you are back.' Uncle Robert, whom he had not noticed sequestered in his favourite armchair by the fireplace, waved him over. 'Come and warm yourself.'

'Have Anthony and Mischa retired?' Hannibal wandered across the room, stopped before the fire and stretched out his hands in front of the licking flames.

'Oh, yes. Mischa was anxious to check on the children.'

'She is a good mother.'

'And very sensible.' With a yawn, Robert set aside his empty glass and slowly got to his feet. 'Tomorrow will be long and hectic. Best we all get a good night's sleep while we can.'

'Goodnight, Robert.' Will's eyes were full of affection as the older Alpha took his leave with a nod and a smile that encompassed them both.

'Goodnight, Uncle.'

There followed a short, not wholly comfortable silence. Hannibal briefly considered excusing himself, but Will had done nothing deserving of such rudeness, no matter how provoking he had been earlier. So instead, he took Robert's vacated seat and watched as Will sank with a groan into the second of the armchairs that flanked the fireplace.

‘Next time, I think I shall chance the snow and walk. Your driver must have hit every bump in the road between Brock Hall and here.’ He glanced at Hannibal quizzically. ‘You are very quiet. How was your journey?’

‘Probably much as you expected it would be when you rode off in such triumph.’

‘Now, Hannibal, do not pout.’

‘I am doing no such thing.’

‘Oh, but you are.’ Still, a note of softness had crept into Will’s voice. ‘Was it very dreadful?’

‘Appalling,’ he flashed back.

Will sat up straighter, suddenly tense. ‘He did not try to - impose on you?’

Slightly mollified by this reaction, Hannibal shrugged. ‘Other than some slight pawing and a roundabout proposal of marriage, not at all.’

‘Some slight *what*?’ Now Will looked positively livid. ‘He touched you? And - he actually proposed to you?'

'Must you sound so astonished?' snapped Hannibal. But then, remembering with shame his own careless behaviour earlier in the evening, he subsided with a shake of his head. ‘It was nothing. Just a little drunken foolishness that cannot be too soon forgotten.’

A muscle worked in Will’s jaw. ‘He deserves a good thrashing.’

‘And I?’ asked Hannibal tightly. ‘What do I deserve? If not for me, Abigail would never have considered Mr Chilton as a prospect. I fear that she will be greatly hurt by this.’

‘Hannibal.’ Leaving his seat, Will knelt before him, and Hannibal’s resistance melted at the gentleness he saw in those beautiful blue eyes. The last time Will had looked at him so, he had been suffering stubbornly in the throes of heat. Now, the impact of the Alpha’s gaze closed his throat. ‘We are each masters of our own fate. You may have encouraged Miss Hobbs to think fondly of the man, but no one can make someone else fall in love.’

Hannibal regarded him bleakly. ‘You would exonerate me, even though I treat others as if they exist solely for my entertainment and convenience?’

‘I would excuse rather than exonerate.’ After a pause, Will held out his hand. ‘But I am sorry that I said such things to you. I spoke in anger, thinking only to provoke you.’

Without hesitation, Hannibal placed his hand in Will’s. The contact made his heart ache strangely. ‘Neither of us were at our best tonight.’

‘Well, as long as lessons have been learned.’

‘They have.’ Eyes glinting, Hannibal added, ‘Yours being to judge less?’

‘And yours to refrain from meddling.’

Hannibal returned Will’s grin. The nagging tension of the last few days had finally eased away, and in its place was growing a far more pleasant - and familiar - sensation.

‘I can promise only to try. I would be loathe to make a vow that I could not be sure to keep. And Abigail is, after all, still without a suitor.’

‘She need not have been.’ Slowly, Will withdrew his hand, leaving Hannibal feeling bereft.

‘You mean, I suppose, the worthy Mr Brown.’

‘He would still have her, you know. He is positively besotted.’ The shake of Will’s head told more eloquently than words what he thought of *that* state of affairs.

Despite his unwavering conviction that Abigail could still do very much better for herself than settle down with a common farmer, Hannibal felt a twinge of conscience. ‘Was he very disappointed?’

‘No one could be more so,’ was the short answer.

‘Then I am sorry.’

‘Yet you would have it no other way.’

Hannibal looked at Will steadily. ‘Contrary to what you might believe, I do not enjoy the suffering of others.’

Will looked back into slumberous, dark-fringed eyes of rich amber and knew that it was time to retreat. The sweet scent that curled about him, the flickering shadows cast by fire and candlelight that highlighted and softened the planes of cheek and jaw, all worked to draw him in. Yet to what end? A quick, fortuitous tumble? After all, Hannibal had not at any point intimated that he saw Will as a potential mate.

‘Will?’

‘My apologies.’ His smile was strained as he rose. ‘Robert was right. It has been a trying day and we really should get some rest before tomorrow’s exertions.’

‘Of course.’ For a moment, Will fancied he saw the shadow of disappointment in Hannibal’s eyes, but his young friend merely nodded before turning his face to the fire. ‘Goodnight, then.’

‘Goodnight, Hannibal.’

Cursing himself for a fool, Will made his way upstairs to the room set aside for his personal use on the occasions he stayed overnight at Hartwell. He was thankful that they had spent Hannibal’s heat in the Omega’s own bedchamber - it was temptation enough to know that he would be only one door away. He undressed slowly, mind distracted by thoughts of the beautiful, infuriating boy he had left downstairs, and eschewed a nightgown in favour of

slipping naked between cool sheets. Alphas generally ran hot, no matter the season, and Will was no exception.

So when, at some indefinable point between the blackest pitch of night and rosy dawn, he felt soft skin against his back and cool hands sliding around his waist to skim over his stomach, he murmured in drowsy appreciation and pressed back to better fit the pleasing shape curled around him. And he sank back into slumber with a single thought.

My Omega.

'Do not I always come back?'

Will awoke to the light sensation of fingers curling and uncurling over his stomach, and the slight tickle of hair brushing his chin. At some point he had rolled onto his back, and his gentle interloper had moved with him. The head pillowed on his chest and the slender thigh hooked across his felt like a claim. He dipped his head, nuzzling the untidy mop of tawny hair, and breathed in the fragrance that was entirely Hannibal. No heat-feverishness, just fresh sweetness. Which begged the question…

'Why are you here?' he murmured, almost to himself, but evidently Hannibal had heard him, for languorous amber eyes lifted to his.

'How could I not be? Your scent pervades the very walls. You drew me back to you, Alpha.'

The use of that title sent a thrill through Will. His arms came up to wrap possessively around Hannibal's waist. 'In truth, I had hoped that you would come to me.'

This prompted a smirk of wanton smugness. Will's eyes lingered on the provocative curve of Hannibal's youthfully plump lips.

'Really? Yet you were rather more reticent last night.' Hannibal glanced up at him coquettishly through thick lashes.

Teasing boy. Will moved his hands lower to cup Hannibal's firm backside. He shifted subtly, brushing together their half-swollen lengths.

'Last night? It is barely morning, Hannibal. Besides, I did not then have such distraction as this to contend with.'

He felt a shudder go through the boy, and wantonly Hannibal rubbed against him. 'I confess I had thought that when my heat ended, I would want you less.'

Torn between feeling flattered and hurt, Will considered how best to reply. Certainly it would be unwise to give the impression that he harboured expectations of any kind. Nothing, he knew, was more likely to send Hannibal running in the opposite direction. Yet his delight at this turn of events could not be denied. Nor, indeed, did he wish to deny either of them. He settled for offering the Omega a plausible excuse.

'Perhaps your heat yet lingers.'

Hannibal dipped his head to press warm lips to a nipple, and hummed against the raised nub. 'In which case, my desire could wane at any moment.' The deliciously teasing stroke of his tongue followed, and Will's sex jerked to fullness.

He grinned, flushed and aroused. 'Best to check.' And dipped his fingertips between Hannibal's cheeks. They came away sticky. 'Hm. Not yet, it seems.' Again he delved, this

time circling lightly the rosebud that had during Hannibal's heat given them both such pleasure. 'How very inconvenient for you.'

Hannibal groaned and surged upwards. Will immediately captured that wicked mouth with a kiss, need growing with each sweet slide of their tongues. But when he felt Hannibal's hand between them, wrapping around him with clear intent, he stilled and broke away.

'We should not.'

Undeterred, Hannibal began a firm rhythm, fingers squeezing and pulling in just the way Will had taught him to pleasure an Alpha. 'Why not?'

Breath coming in short pants, Will met eyes blown black with desire. 'It feels illicit. Not for the world would I insult your uncle by taking advantage of his nephew beneath his own roof.'

'You had no compunction about sleeping with me here during my heat.'

'That was different and you know it'

'My dear Will,' purred Hannibal, increasing his pace until Will was arching helplessly into his touch, 'in this case, am not *I* taking advantage of *you*?'

In retaliation, Will returned his attention to Hannibal's slick entrance, pushing the tip of his finger inside, a light breach that brought satisfyingly hectic colour to Hannibal's cheeks and drew from him a noise somewhere between a gasp and a moan.

'At this point I would say that it is entirely mutual.' Slowly, he circled and withdrew before pushing back in again. 'Tell me what you want, Hannibal.'

Warm lips pressed to his, tongue breaching and thrusting in shameless imitation. 'Your knot, *Alpha*.'

Will groaned. 'How am I supposed to resist you?'

Hannibal pulled away and rolled onto his stomach, eyes pleasure-glazed, cheeks ruddy. 'You worry too much.'

'Insolent boy.' With a growl, Will followed, seizing Hannibal's hips and pulling them up. On impulse, he leaned in and sought with his tongue that glistening opening, penetrating again and again, sucking on his boy's sweetness until clever words were abandoned for helpless sobs. Yet when finally he reared back and fed his pulsing length into the welcoming clutch of Hannibal's body, he too was rendered senseless to all but raw pleasure. They writhed together, sweat mingling with their ecstatic cries as Will pushed his knot past the clutching rim.

'You go so deep,' gasped Hannibal, pressing against him. 'I want you deeper still.'

'Do you, now?' Will rocked back onto his knees, hauling Hannibal up with him. One arm around the boy's waist anchored them together, back to chest; his other hand roamed across a belly youthfully taut, and up to stroke, featherlight, over the soft dusting of hair through

which peeked nipples that tightened beautifully beneath his touch. ‘Always so demanding. You must learn patience.’ He strummed each nub until Hannibal’s pleas were almost incoherent. Until his back was arched in an exquisite bow and his hands came up to clench in Will’s hair. Will sought then the length that stood out ruddy and dripping from the cradle of Hannibal’s thighs. ‘I would love to indulge you further, but I fear you will not last.’

‘Will.’ None too gently, Hannibal twisted a fistful of hair as he hissed, ‘Touch me.’

‘Such imperiousness.’

But Will’s own self-restraint was fast deserting him as muscles tightened and lust coiled. He felt each tug on Hannibal’s flesh as if he were pleasuring himself, thrusting up hard in sympathy; and as he brushed against that secret place within, he grasped Hannibal’s jaw and turned his face for a rough kiss, muffling his boy’s cries as they pulsed white heat together.

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In the bliss of satiation, it took Hannibal little time to fall again asleep. Waking for the second time, however, was a far less pleasant experience. Shaken by persistent dreams of his mother - of the sorrowful face and piteous sobs that were all he remembered of her final weeks as she took to haunting his father’s empty suite of rooms - Hannibal felt suddenly the arms wrapped around him in affectionate embrace as suffocating bands of steel. Heart beating wildly, he slipped from the bed, and hunted for the robe which he had dropped the night before in an uncharacteristic gesture of recklessness. Finding it in a pool of silk, he shrugged it on, tying the belt firmly around his waist. Despite the chill, he was drawn to the frosted window, opening the casement and leaning out to breathe deeply, fogging the air as he sought to rid himself of the clinging shreds of his nightmare. Liquid light suffused nature’s canvas, lending a softness to white-dusted lawn and diamante shrubbery. It was going to be a perfect day.

‘Hannibal? What are you doing? You will freeze.’ There followed a slight rustling and a stifled yawn. ‘Come back to bed.’

Hannibal turned to survey the naked Alpha now sitting upright amid the chaos of creased sheets and misshapen pillows: the ghost of stubble on his jaw, curls rumpled into peaks by demanding fingers, a glint of amusement in blue eyes. Utterly beautiful. The perfect prospective mate.

And if you took him and then lost him? Would you roam the rooms of Lupus Hall, a living ghost, lost to all but endless grief?

His brow furrowed. Surely there was no comparison between his parents’ love for one another and this - this biological complication that his late first heat had created. Panic tightened his throat and harshened his voice.

‘Do not presume to tell me what I should or should not do. You forget yourself, Will. As pleasant as this has been, you are not my Alpha.’

For a moment, Will looked stunned. But then his expression shuttered, and *his* voice, when it came, was ice. ‘You were happy enough to call me Alpha a few hours ago. But now, I

suppose, it no longer serves any purpose as you have got what you wanted.'

'Have I?'

The question was directed at himself as much as Will, who in any case had scrambled from the bed and was now too busy pulling on his clothes to listen. Every movement was harsh, jerky, his face averted.

'I should have listened to my instincts and turned you out at dawn.' Shirt untucked, waistcoat hanging open, boots in hand, Will wrenched open the door and directed at Hannibal one final scorching glare. 'Have a care, Hannibal. Someday, all of your maneuvering may cost you dear.'

And then he was gone.

***

Bathed and dressed, Hannibal dismissed the idea of food the instant he heard the sounds of hilarity coming from the breakfast room. They served only to increase the hollow feeling that had taken hold of him as he had stared around the empty bedchamber that still smelled of their coupling, Will's scornful words ringing in his ears. Christmas Day or not, a period of solitude was required if he were to regain his equilibrium. He turned, therefore, and headed outside.

The stables were mercifully quiet, and he sat for some time with Virgil, who was for the winter confined finally to his stall.

'I did only what was best,' he muttered sullenly at length, and Virgil ceased scratching for seed to cock his head to the side, trilling as if in agreement. 'And yet he chose insults over understanding. The next time you see him, Virgil, I give you full permission to peck his ankles to the bone.'

Bravado being all very well, it was impossible that he could keep to himself all day, although he stubbornly forwent luncheon. When finally dinner time came, and he could avoid the rest of the party no longer, Hannibal entered the dining room with the air of one going before a firing squad. Will, he noticed immediately, was absent from his habitual place opposite Hannibal's, and had removed himself to the opposite end of the table where he appeared engrossed in conversation with Uncle Robert. Lips tightening, Hannibal determined to ignore them both, and he took his seat without ceremony. Anthony, whose chair it was that Will had commandeered, and who sat in his brother's seat in his stead, had an uncharacteristically serious air about him. He and Mischa exchanged worried looks before he leaned forward, soup spoon in hand, and addressed Hannibal quietly.

'What happened, Hannibal? Your absence has been keenly felt. Robert even sent a servant out to look for you. He was most relieved to be informed that you had not, after all, fallen into the lake.'

Hannibal scowled and scooped up his own spoon. 'How ridiculous. I was in the stables and then reading in my room. There was absolutely no need for such theatrics.'

Despite his resolve, however, he could not help but glance down the table, where his uncle was looking back at him with a gentle smile. Will, of course, did not acknowledge him, his profile set and tense, his fingers clenched around his wine goblet.

Anthony had followed his gaze. ‘My brother has scarce spoken a dozen words all day.’

Hannibal’s heart clenched. Irritated by his own weakness, he snapped, ‘Will has a tendency to overreact.’

‘Hm.’ Anthony pursed his lips. ‘Perhaps that is why he has announced his intention to accompany Mischa, the children and I back to London tomorrow.’

Hannibal took to rearranging his napkin as the soup bowls were removed, and it was some moments before he next spoke. ‘I imagine that he is eager to spend more time with little Hanna and the boys.’

‘Perhaps.’ But Anthony’s tone left Hannibal in no doubt of his brother-in-law’s scepticism.

Appetite well and truly gone, Hannibal endured the seemingly endless parade of courses as best he could. Mischa, dear Mischa, seemed to sense his distress and filled the silence with tales from the nursery. Hannibal listened gamely, but still he could not resist shooting glances at Will, who ignored him steadfastly and spent the entirety of the meal in determined conversation with Uncle Robert. By the end of the meal, dismay had given way to indignation.

Who is he to inflict punishment in this way? To sulk and be deliberately blind to reason? Let him go to London and be done.

***

‘My apologies, Robert.’ Wryly, Will poured his friend a fresh glass of Madeira. ‘I did not mean to monopolise you so tonight.’

‘Nonsense.’ Robert winked at him before taking a hearty swallow. ‘I do dimly recall what it is to be young, you know. I presume that my nephew has been more than usually trying.’

Will cleared his throat. ‘I should not have presumed to take Anthony’s seat.’

‘I shall take that as an affirmative.’ With a low chuckle, Robert reached out and patted Will’s hand. ‘Try not to take it too much to heart. I love Hannibal dearly, but he has still a deal of growing up to do.’

‘He is of age.’ Uncomfortable, Will shifted his gaze down to his untouched dessert as, viciously, his conscience taunted him. *Barely. And perhaps Robert would not be so forbearing if he knew of last night’s exploits. It was one thing to have helped Hannibal through his first heat, but this? Pure selfish indulgence.*

‘Do not mistake me, Will. Hannibal is a fine young man, yet he has been too much at home - too sheltered from the realities of life.’ Robert sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. ‘My

fault, of course. After his parents' deaths, I sought to keep him from further distress. But perhaps I have succeeded only in limiting his emotional growth.'

'No, Robert, never fear that.' Firmly, Will shook his head. 'Hannibal is spoiled, yes, and headstrong.' *And impossibly desirable and ruinously tempting.* 'But he is also clever and insightful and loyal to a fault.' A reluctant smile tugged at his lips. 'And passionate about what he believes to be right. You have guided him to his confidence. Experience will teach him the rest.'

'And, perhaps, a slightly firmer hand?'

Will did not miss Robert's sly look. He grimaced. 'I shall say only that we are at present at an impasse. Best that I take my leave for a while.' Skin prickling, he felt again Hannibal's eyes on him - the boy's frustration and impatience soured the air.

Robert regarded him earnestly. 'I hope that you will not stay away too long. Hannibal is not the only one who will miss you.'

'Thank you, old friend, but there is no need to worry.' Will's smile was bleak. 'Do not I always come back?'

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'It is so kind of you to tell me in person.'

Abigail hiccuped, attempting valiantly to suppress her sniffles. Absently, Hannibal handed her a handkerchief. In the usual course, he would at this point be admiring her self-control, but at present he was too caught up in memories of the previous morning. Will's polite but distant leave-taking as he had stepped into the carriage behind the rest of the family had done nothing to ease the almost-constant pressure in Hannibal's chest. An awful tightness that had been building ever since Will had left the table immediately after dinner on Christmas night, lines of strain around his eyes and mouth, retiring early and citing a slight headache as the reason.

But you know better. You should have gone to him.

Yet what would that have solved? The impossibility of the situation pulled from him a sound of frustration.

'Hannibal? Are you well?' Abigail was looking at him with watery-eyed concern.

'Quite well, I assure you.' Mentally shaking off his moroseness, Hannibal adopted a brisk tone. 'Tomorrow I shall bring you a fruit basket. We must get you fully recovered and out of this bed as soon as possible.'

'For what purpose?' There went the lower lip again, quivering dangerously. 'Miss Alana told me this morning that Mr Chilton has gone away to Bath.'

Hannibal tutted and reached for Abigail's hand. 'And what care you for that after the way he has behaved? You are to forget Mr Chilton, Abigail, do you hear?'

‘Everyone here is so very fond of him, that might be difficult.’ Woebegone, she scrubbed at her nose with the handkerchief.

Deciding that such inelegance was excusable given the circumstances, Hannibal smiled reassuringly. ‘I shall explain the situation to the Misses Verger-Bloom. I am sure that when they hear of Mr Chilton’s infamous conduct towards you and I, they will think very differently about him. And their opinions will naturally be carried to the staff and pupils.’

Privately, Hannibal avowed to present Mr Chilton’s shortcomings in as extravagant a manner as possible. Better to embellish a little and ensure an estrangement rather than pay court to diplomacy and risk further unhappiness for Abigail.

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‘Hannibal, no! Mr Chilton forced himself on you?’ Soft brown eyes filled with horror, Alana Verger-Bloom clutched at her wife’s arm. ‘Margot, we have entertained this man in our home!’

‘He made an attempt to… persuade me to become his mate.’ It was not difficult to muster a hectic blush - all that was required for that was the thought of Will pressing naked against him on Christmas morning. Revelling in his role, Hannibal lifted earnest eyes to Alana. ‘He did not, however, succeed. And I think it likely that he will never again behave in such a way - doubtless the drink was responsible.’

‘Your forbearance is admirable.’ The glint of steel in Margot’s eyes belied her even tone. Bird-like in appearance, her delicate features masked a strength of character that was not to be underestimated. ‘Thank you for informing us, Hannibal. Be assured that upon his return to Balmore, Mr Chilton will no longer be welcome at this establishment.’

‘I tell you this in the strictest confidence, of course.’ With deliberate hesitance, Hannibal added, ‘It would be as well, for the peace of mind of your pupils, to keep from them the more shocking aspects of Mr Chilton’s behaviour.’

‘Of course. You can count on us to be discreet.’ Alana’s smile was gratifyingly sympathetic.

As he walked away, Hannibal noted with relief that he was feeling almost himself again. Perhaps, all things considered, Will had been right to remove himself for a time. They could both regain their equilibiums and, with any luck, meet again as the dear friends they were surely destined to be. The madness of the past week, he decided, could not be soon enough forgot.

'We are but little acquainted.'

December gave way to January and Randall Tier did not come. His aunt, he explained in a letter that everyone agreed was very finely expressed, had caught a chill over Christmas and could not at present spare him.

Hannibal was not in a state of spirits to care very much. He made all the appropriate noises of sympathy to Mr Crawford and Chiyoh, but as the days plodded on he was plagued by a growing sense of dissatisfaction that finally he put down to the persistent inclement weather.

One afternoon in late January, the sleet having stopped and the footpaths deemed finally safe again to traverse, Hannibal was out walking in the village with a fully-recovered Abigail when he realised too late that coming their way was the lovelorn Mr Brown. Impossible to avoid a meeting - unless… He looked about and saw that they were almost upon Applewood Cottage, the home of Mr Franklyn. Without pause, he stepped up to the front door, rapped smartly with his cane and hustled Abigail inside the moment the servant bade them enter. It was Hannibal's custom to avoid visiting this particular household any more often than once a fortnight; but as the alternative was a confrontation with the remaining of Abigail's former suitors whom she still spoke of with troubling fondness, Hannibal considered this to be the lesser of the two evils.

Mr Franklyn was a rotund man of six-and-thirty, with a pleasing countenance and twinkling brown eyes set in a whiskered face. The son of the former vicar of Balmore, his nervous disposition had rendered him unfitted for a profession, and he lived frugally on the small inheritance left by his late mother. He was, in Hannibal's opinion, mystifyingly popular for a Beta neither young, rich nor mated. Lacking even in intellectual superiority, he was nonetheless a great favourite in all the best circles, his relentlessly cheerful disposition and genuine interest in everybody making him an ideal addition to any party. He had no family save his late sister's child, Fredricka, who had been fortunate enough to secure a benefactor at the age of nine, her late father's dearest friend, Mr Price of Weymouth.

'Please excuse the intrusion,' said Hannibal, as they were shown into the cramped front parlour.

Mr Franklyn's eyes were wide, his complexion ruddy with delight as he rushed forward to greet his unexpected guests. 'Mr Lecter, you must know that it is always a pleasure to receive you. And Miss Hobbs, how lovely to meet you at last.'

Abigail blushed prettily and sat down beside Hannibal on the rather shabby sofa.

Hannibal cast about for something to say and settled on the topic most likely to please their host. 'Have you heard from Miss Lounds recently? I hope that she is well.'

True to form, Mr Franklyn's face lit up. 'I have indeed. How kind of you to ask, Mr Lecter.' He rushed over to the sideboard and took up a letter which, Hannibal noticed with no little amusement, had been displayed in pride of place on a small silver salver. Returning, Mr Franklyn seated himself opposite his guests and unfolded the paper. 'Fredricka has this very

week written with the most wonderful news. Now that her most particular friend is married, she is to leave her situation as soon as the couple embark on their honeymoon, and return to Balmore!'

'Her situation?' Abigail looked from Mr Franklyn to Hannibal.

'Mr Franklyn's niece has resided with the Prices, friends of her father's, since she was a child.'

'And they have taken excellent care of her,' beamed Mr Franklyn. 'Dear Fredricka has wanted for nothing, including companionship. The Prices' daughter has been as a sister to her.'

'Will not it pain them to be separated?' Hannibal waved away the servant who entered at that moment with a plate of overcooked biscuits; although mystifyingly, Abigail partook with enthusiasm.

'Ah well,' sighed Mr Franklyn, 'as I explained to Fredricka in my last letter, Miss Price's marriage was bound to change things between them. Mrs Zeller, as she is now, wished for Fredricka to take a post as companion to her after the honeymoon, but Fredricka would not hear of it. Even though she and Mr Zeller get along famously!'

For the first time since their arrival, Hannibal regarded the letter with real interest. 'Do they?'

'Oh yes, particularly since the service he lately rendered Fredricka, catching her when she would have slipped on the ice as they all walked along the promenade. It would have resulted in a nasty fall at the very least. Fredricka cannot praise Mr Zeller highly enough!'

The scent of scandal was faint but intriguing. 'Mrs Zeller must be very disappointed by her decision to go.'

'Excessively. But Fredricka is adamant. She will leave them and return to the bosom of her family.'

Mr Franklyn looked exceedingly gratified about this, but Hannibal could not help but wonder whether Miss Lounds' eagerness to put such considerable distance between herself and the Zellers might have more to do with the gallant *Mr* Zeller than with a desire to swap the luxuries of the Prices' estate for the extremely limited amenities of Applewood Cottage.

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A little over a month's absence had done little to calm Will's troubled mind, although the time that he had spent with his family in London had, as always, brought him a great deal of pleasure. As the weeks had passed, he had told himself that his principal design in returning home before the spring was the need to deal with the issues outlined in his steward's increasingly agitated letters. But the instant his carriage passed the boundary into Balmore, it was to Hartwell, not Lupus Hall, that he directed his driver.

To his chagrin, he was informed at the door that neither occupant was at home. Mr Robert Lecter was out walking, while Mr Hannibal Lecter was visiting with Mr Franklyn and his niece, lately arrived from Weymouth. Knowing Hannibal's antipathy towards Miss Lounds, whom nobody in Balmore had set eyes on in two years, Will was burning with curiosity to discover whether a renewal of the acquaintance had made Hannibal more or less inclined to dislike the girl. And so he set forth at once to find out.

It was a small party that turned their gazes on him when he walked into the dimly-lit parlour. Armed with apologies for his intrusion, and a bottle of the finest wine from Anthony's cellar, he was welcomed effusively by Mr Franklyn, but it was Hannibal's reaction that he was most anxious to gauge. He need not have worried. A blush had overspread the apples of the Omega's cheeks, but his eyes were warm, and a ready smile sprang to his lips as he returned Will's greeting.

'The London break has done you good. You look well.'

The huskiness of his voice melted Will's final trace of reserve, and suddenly it was as if the intervening month had never happened. Memories of Christmas Eve - and of the night that had followed - brought a hot glow to his cheeks that he knew must rival Hannibal's. He swallowed hard.

'As do you.'

Will's eyes travelled greedily over the smartly-clad form of his young friend, scarlet coat emphasising his slender shoulders, cream breeches hugging muscular thighs. Hat balanced on his knee, his head was bare, and Will noted with a pang the hair that now brushed the top of his collar. Such a trifling detail, yet it was a poignant reminder of their separation - and of the temporary estrangement that had brought it about. *You are all manner of foolishness, Will Graham, running away as if...*

'And Fredricka! Does not she also look splendid?'

Mr Franklyn's gushing words shook Will out of his brooding reverie and prompted him to remember his manners. He turned with haste to bow to the fourth occupant of the room, who was seated primly on a chair, observing him with a cat-like curiosity that she quickly masked.

'Miss Lounds, pray do forgive me. I am delighted to see you back with us once again.'

'Thank you, Mr Graham.' Miss Lounds smiled graciously. 'It is good to be home.'

'Oh, my dear Fredricka.' Mr Franklyn was positively bursting with fondness. 'We shall have a merry time, you and I.'

It was easy to see the influence of the Prices - from her beautifully pinned flaming-red hair to the satin shoes peeping out from beneath a gown of green muslin, Miss Fredricka Lounds exuded refinement. It was there also in the turn of her head and her manner of expression, although a strange sadness lurked in her eyes that Will could only attribute to the loss of her friends. This begged the question of why, then, she had left them. Hannibal's last letter to

Mischa had outlined the circumstances of Miss Lounds' return, but something told Will that there was more to the situation than was immediately apparent.

He bowed again and took a chair adjacent to her, opposite Hannibal who was sharing the sofa with Mr Franklyn and not looking too happy about it. The avuncular Beta did have a habit of gesturing expansively, and more than once Hannibal seemed in danger of being knocked from his seat.

'Miss Lounds has been telling us of her encounter with Mr Tier in Weymouth.' Hannibal's eyes conveyed a private joke, and ridiculously it set Will's heart beating fast again. But then it could not be denied that he had greatly missed their unspoken conversations.

'Oh, really?'

'Yes, although she is being very mysterious about it.'

From Hannibal's tone, it was clear that this was a state of affairs that simply would not do. Miss Lounds laughed uneasily.

'I do not mean to be. While it is true that Mr Tier and I were at Weymouth at the same time, we are but little acquainted.'

'Still, you must have gained some impression of him. What can you tell us of his intellect?' pressed Hannibal, irritating Will with his persistence on the topic of Jack's neglectful son. 'His conversation?'

'Most people seem to consider him clever.'

'And his style of dress? Does he espouse the latest French fashions?'

'I really could not say. I am no judge of such things.'

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Half an hour later, Will walked patiently alongside an incensed and glowering Hannibal as they returned together to Hartwell.

'She was being deliberately unhelpful,' muttered Hannibal, adding darkly, 'Mark my words, Miss Lounds intends to distribute mere scraps of information about Mr Tier in order to increase people's interest by suspense.'

'It is possible that her vagueness is genuine,' replied Will. 'Not everyone is as intrigued by Mr Tier as you, Hannibal.' Try as he might, he could not keep a slight edge from his voice. Here they were, reunited after full a month, yet it seemed that Hannibal's head was full of the tiresome Randall Tier.

Hannibal's response was a scornful sideways glance. 'I think you will find that everyone save you - and, it seems, Miss Lounds - is interested in Mr Tier. *You* seem determined only to think ill of him.'

‘I speak as I find,’ retorted Will, growing more ruffled by the moment. ‘And I find it inconceivable that a young man of education and means has been unable to contrive a visit to his father at any point in the *five months* since his marriage.’

‘You forget that Mr Tier is entirely dependent upon his aunt’s whims, and she has been unwilling to spare him.’

Annoyed by Hannibal’s stout defence of Mr Tier, Will snapped, ‘She spared him for a jaunt to Weymouth.’

Hannibal opened his mouth to reply and then closed it again. Will sighed.

‘Forgive me for being terse but I cannot understand how you, with your excellent good sense, can be so blind.’

To his surprise, Hannibal immediately conceded the point. ‘Certainly I am prejudiced in Mr Tier’s favour - for the sake of my dear Chiyoh, I cannot be otherwise. I would not have her believe that her new stepson has been avoiding her deliberately.’ He looked at Will sharply. ‘As for you, admit it - you are prejudiced *against* him.’

Disconcerted, Will shot back, not entirely truthfully, ‘I can assure you that Mr Tier is a person whom I never think of from one month’s end to another. I concede that I have no taste for the sort of showy individual his letters indicate him to be, but trust me - I have far more worthy subjects with which to occupy my thoughts.’

They walked on in silence for another few minutes. It was difficult to tell whether Hannibal was feeling chastened or affronted. Will suspected the latter, and at the gates of Hartwell he stopped. ‘Hannibal, one moment.’

He removed his hat and scrubbed a hand through his hair, searching for the right words. ‘I am sorry. That I left Hartwell so abruptly in December. That I left things between us so - unsatisfactory.’

Instantly, Hannibal’s expression of hauteur mellowed and his face flushed again. ‘That was not your fault.’ Earnest eyes of softest amber met Will’s. ‘I have examined my own behaviour since and found it to have been entirely wanting. I was - confused - about what was happening between us, and instead of confiding in you, I took my frustration out on you. How. then, could I blame you for walking away?’

Unable to prevent himself, Will stepped closer, reaching out to clasp Hannibal’s gloved hand. ‘I need you to know that I respect your independence, Hannibal. Our relationship means everything to me. Not for the world would I jeopardise it.’

The warmth in Hannibal’s returning gaze was reward enough. He squeezed Will’s hand.

‘Nor would I.’

Instinct alone guided Will as he leaned forward and kissed the boy who had never left his thoughts in all the days and nights they had been apart. It was the softest of touches, a mere

brush of lips, yet it took an immense effort to pull back.

‘I am very glad to hear it.’ He released Hannibal’s hand, forcing himself to add, ‘Then it is perhaps for the best that we resume our former friendship and put behind us the events of last year.’

Hannibal blinked but replied, quickly, ‘Yes, of course.’

It would be, Will knew, easier said than done; a yearning had been awoken in him that he would be hard pressed to dismiss. Even without the lure of a heat, Hannibal was unquestionably a most desirable Omega. And Will would not soon forget the exquisite pleasure of being buried deep inside him, surrounded by his scent, held close in his arms. But if safeguarding Hannibal’s trust and affection meant putting aside his more passionate feelings, then he would endeavour to do so.

Halfway down the birch-lined avenue, a recollection brought a wry smile to Will’s face. ‘In all the excitement of meeting Miss Lounds, I had forgotten. I have a piece of news for you.’

‘I would hardly classify Miss Lounds as exciting,’ sniffed Hannibal. ‘However,’ he allowed, ‘I do, as you know, have a liking for news. What is it?’

With the teasing raise of an eyebrow, Will leaned in close and announced, sotto voce, ‘Mr Chilton is to be married.’

'Mr Tier is as pleasant a young man as I have ever met.'

Mr Chilton returned, a very happy man. His smugness was apparent from the moment he paraded into the drawing room at Hartwell, casting constant adoring glances at the lady who walked beside him. Miss Bedelia du Maurier, as was, appeared fearlessly self-possessed, and seemed not in the least intimidated by the faces that were turned towards her with varying degrees of curiosity. Clad in a high-waisted gown of rich purple velvet, extravagant gold curls peeping from beneath a matching hat, she put Hannibal in mind of a sleek cat eyeing caged canaries.

Uncle Robert approached her first, taking her proffered hand and leading her to the chaise longue.

‘Mrs Chilton, welcome to Balmore. May I offer you my sincere congratulations? And you too, Mr Chilton.’

Mrs Chilton’s smile did not quite reach her green eyes. ‘Thank you. It has been quite the time, I must say. Are not public carriages extremely vexing? Pater would have lent us his own if he had not been in need of it himself. He travels a great deal, you see. He was quite afraid for me, coming to live amongst quiet people after the large and varied society which I have been used to enjoying in London. Indeed, when first I came into the village, given its extremely small size I did not expect to find anywhere with such large apartments and extensive grounds as this. Why, it reminds me almost of dear Pater’s seat.’ She turned to Mr Chilton, who hovered behind her attentively. ‘Do not you think so, Mr C?’

‘Oh, indeed, my heart.’

Hannibal wished fervently that Will were present. Uncle Robert was far too well-mannered to indulge in eye-rolling at the expense of anyone - certainly not a guest in his house. And Abigail was in no fit state to do more than blush frantically and study the patterns on the rug. It was unfortunate that the newlyweds had called without notice, but at least the awkward business of first meetings could be dealt with in one fell swoop.

Alas, Will had been much engaged with estate business since their reunion at Applewood Cottage a week since, although he had intimated in a note delivered only that morning that he would be at the Crawfords’ the following afternoon for tea. Hannibal saw this as a reaching out of sorts and was glad of it. His heart had lurched in the most peculiar and unpleasant way at Will’s suggestion that, going forward, they should be solely friends. And while he readily admitted to himself the contrariness of such a reaction, still, to know that that particular avenue of closeness was definitively cut off bothered him more than he would have thought possible. Perhaps Will, too, had thought better of it. Whatever the case, Hannibal had resolved to be at Brock Hall the next day with alacrity.

Meanwhile, Mrs Chilton had moved on to commenting rather disdainfully on the narrowness of the staircase in her new home. And the low ceilings. And the grave discovery that the windows in the salon faced full west.

‘Of course, it is nothing to me,’ she sighed, lifting a hand which was clasped immediately by her doting husband. ‘As I told my caro sposo the evening he proposed, I would far rather live quietly in a country parsonage than end as one of Bluebeard’s wives.’ And she laughed delicately at her own joke.

The mention of a proposal had started Abigail’s lip trembling, and Hannibal noted with narrowing eyes the look of satisfaction that passed between Mrs Chilton and her *caro sposo.* Ah, here was somebody not to be underestimated. Unmistakably Alphan, her almost aggressively sensual, musky scent dominated the room. Clearly, Mr Chilton’s desire for an Omegan bride had been quashed by the determination of his fearsome suitor.

‘Are you musical, Mrs Chilton?’ asked Hannibal, determined to draw the conversation away from dangerous territory.

‘I have been known to compose a tune or two.’ She glanced about the room. ‘You have a harpsichord, I see. I myself regard them as rather clumsy instruments.’

With great strength of will, Hannibal resisted ordering her immediately from the house.

‘A pity. I was about to ask whether you would do us the honour of playing something.’

‘Do not you have a pianoforte?’ Mrs Chilton looked horrified at the very thought that they might not.

‘In the salon,’ replied Uncle Robert genially . ‘Perhaps next time, then.’

The visit proceeded with consistent tedium. Finally, Mrs Chilton rose to her feet, and looked around in clear expectation of everyone else following suit. Hannibal was not sorry for the hint. Abigail gave a polite curtsey, which was ignored by the visitors, who had spoken not one word to her in the entirety of their stay; and Uncle Robert rang the bell for the carriage to be brought round.

‘I would not think of your walking back to the parsonage. Pray, allow me this small courtesy.’

Mrs Chilton did, with a satisfied smirk and barely a thank you. At the door, she turned with a light exclamation. ‘Oh, I almost forgot. As we passed through the village on our way here, we saw a friend of Mr C’s. You will never guess.’

‘I certainly shall not,’ muttered Hannibal.

Uncle Robert coughed hastily. ‘Pardon me. Pray do tell us, Mrs Chilton.’

‘Why, it was William,’ declared she triumphantly. ‘William himself! Was not that fortunate?’

Hannibal could scarce believe his ears. ‘Whom did you say?’

‘William Graham, of course,’ she trilled. ‘And do you know, I found him to be quite the gentleman.’

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Four-and-twenty hours were not sufficient to lessen Hannibal's outrage.

'William, indeed,' he fumed, pacing before the Crawfords' fireplace. '*William.*'

'It is my name,' commented Will mildly, removing a speck of fluff from the cuff of his coat.

'Which nobody has ever used in the course of your life.' Hannibal emitted a sound of disgust. 'The presumption. And then, to discuss your status as a gentleman as if it were even in question!'

'Do sit down, Hannibal,' interjected Chiyoh. 'You will make yourself dizzy.'

'I cannot understand why you are not offended,' protested Hannibal, returning at last to sit down beside Will. Even as he fumed, he noted with appreciation how well his friend looked, vital and handsome in the moss-green coat that was Hannibal's favourite, legs crossed to reveal shapely calves.

'Why would I be? Mrs Chilton is nothing to me. Besides,' added Will softly, placing a hand on Hannibal's shoulder, 'I think that you are offended enough for both of us.'

Will's light touch and the warmth of his regard served finally to calm Hannibal's churning indignation. Chiyoh was watching them with an expression of indulgence, but he could not bring himself to move away if it meant losing the feeling of deep contentment that Will's closeness was evoking.

In the next instant, however, footsteps and voices in the hallway drew the attention of all the occupants of the room to the open doorway; and shortly thereafter, into the salon walked Mr Crawford with a young gentleman whom Hannibal had never before seen. Dark-haired and dark-eyed, his slim build was accentuated by the fine cut of his blue coat, gold waistcoat and white breeches. He had a handsome face, with features rather more pretty than strong. His carriage and expression exuded a familiar affability, and even before Mr Crawford opened his mouth to make the introductions, Hannibal knew that here, at last, was the famous Randall Tier.

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Randall Tier was everything that Will had expected. Ebullient and charming and determined to make himself agreeable to them all.

'My dearest mama,' he cried, lifting Chiyoh's hand to his lips. 'May I call you Mama? I have so longed to meet you.'

'Of course, Randall.' Her eyes were gentle on him and Will seethed on her behalf.

Almost half a year since the wedding and yet he offers no apology for his neglect. Insufferable young pup.

Hannibal's animated countenance was not helping. As Mr Tier regaled the company with tales of his heroic journey to Balmore, which had necessitated him sojourning for two nights

in inns that were barely tolerable, Hannibal's steadfast attentiveness drove an ugly spike of jealousy through Will's heart. And yet, had not he always expected this? For years, he knew, Jack had harboured hopes of his son coming to Balmore and finding a match in the boy whom he regarded with all the fondness of an uncle.

As galling as the entire situation was, Will realised after a time that if he did not soon speak, his reticence would be noticed.

'Have you any plans for your stay, Mr Tier?' He was pleased with his composure - there was barely an edge to his voice. Hannibal, of course, had caught it. He was looking at Will with a puzzled air, his brow slightly furrowed.

'None at all,' came Randall Tier's cheerful response. 'Although,' he added, as if having just recollected something, 'there is one family upon whom I should call at some time or other.' And looking to his father, 'The Franklyns, I believe they are called.'

'You know Mr Franklyn?' Jack's surprise surely spoke for all of them. As far as anyone knew, Mr Franklyn had never travelled any further than Virginia Hill, the pretty stretch of countryside that separated Balmore from its nearest neighbour.

'Not precisely. The acquaintance is rather with a Miss Lounds, whom I believe is Mr Franklyn's niece.'

Ah, yes. The Weymouth connection.

'I can take you as far as Applewood Cottage,' offered Jack. 'I have some business in the village that I can attend to as easily this afternoon as tomorrow.'

'Thank you, Father. Of course, it could wait another day or two, but one would not wish to be rude. Even a slight acquaintance demands acknowledgement.'

'Miss Lounds has not been long in Balmore either,' remarked Hannibal. 'What can you tell us of her, Mr Tier?'

Will had the curious feeling that Mr Tier was somewhat perturbed by the question. He flashed an uneasy smile and almost, heaven forbid, shrugged.

'I am afraid that I cannot offer much by way of an opinion. It really was the briefest of meetings. In point of fact, I doubt that my visit today will last for more than a few minutes.'

An imp of mischief prompted Will to suggest, 'Then perhaps you need not turn out this afternoon after all.'

Ah, but,' cried Mr Tier after a pause, expression brightening to its former cheeriness, 'there is one other place which I would like very much to see. You have often spoken, Father, of Ravenstag Inn, and its eminent suitability as a place of entertainment. It is my intention,' he announced, looking from face to face, 'to liven up this little village by organising a ball. What think you? Would not it be a grand scheme?'

Will listened to the chorus of enthusiastic responses with weary resignation. Organising a ball was no small endeavour, though perhaps such an undertaking might keep Mr Tier from paying too many calls on Hartwell. The thought lightened his mood to the degree that he was able to offer a short nod of acquiescence.

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By tacit agreement, Will accompanied Hannibal back to Hartwell for dinner. Although it had long been customary for him to dine with them and even call on them unannounced at all hours of the day, he felt a strange awkwardness as they proceeded in silence along the lane that bordered the Hartwell estate. It was Hannibal who spoke first.

‘You were uncommonly quiet at the Crawfords’.’

‘Really? Have you ever known me to be loquacious?’

That earned him a withering look. ‘There was certainly no danger of that. In fact, for most of the afternoon you were giving a very passable imitation of a statue.’

‘Nonsense. I nodded at least once. And I shook hands with the fellow when he came in. What more did you require of me?’

‘You shook hands only after he offered his, and after a pause.’

‘My,’ remarked Will mockingly, ‘you were certainly paying a great deal of attention to *one* of us.’

He felt Hannibal’s stare. ‘Are you - jealous?’

To blush now would be unendurable. ‘Do not be absurd,’ he snapped. ‘I simply have little time for coxcombs.’

‘How can you speak of him so?’ Hannibal looked aghast. ‘Mr Tier is as pleasant a young man as I have ever met.’

Young. A snake of insecurity coiled about Will’s heart and squeezed hard.

‘Really? I find him frivolous at best.’

‘Yet he has made the effort to call on Miss Lounds without delay.’ Hannibal’s tone frosted the air between them.

‘Yes, and what a strange business is that? They are only very slight acquaintances, he says. He has nothing at all to say of her. And yet there he goes on his very first day, running off to pay a call on her. Mark my words, there is something about that entire situation that is most suspicious.’

‘Suspicious?’ Hannibal scoffed. ‘You are being ridiculous.’

‘Perhaps.’ Will fixed stern eyes on his disdainful companion. ‘But one thing I can say with certainty, and that is that I can live very happily without Mr Tier’s ingratiating charms and grand schemes.’

'You could stay.'

Throughout dinner, Hannibal brooded over Will's comments with regard to Randall Tier and Miss Lounds. After Uncle Robert had bade them goodnight and retired to his rooms, Hannibal too left the table and walked through to the drawing room, unwilling to allow Will the chance to take his leave before they had had an opportunity to talk alone.

'A glass of Madeira?'

'I would prefer whiskey.'

Hannibal raised his eyebrows, darting a glance at the Alpha who had, thankfully, followed him.

'Feeling illicit, Will?'

Realising too late how that must have sounded, he ducked his head and busied himself retrieving his uncle's bottle of contraband from the secret compartment within the dresser until the inevitable blush had subsided. He poured two generous glasses of the smoky liquid, handed one to Will, and settled back into one of the flanking fireside chairs. After a pause, Will took the other. They sat for some moments, sipping slowly, eyeing each other across the divide.

Surprisingly, it was Will who broke the silence, his expression earnest.

'Forgive my earlier curtness. I was… not myself.'

Hannibal could not resist pushing a little. 'You were quite rude, Will.'

Will's lips tightened but he did not argue the point. 'I stand by my feelings about Mr Tier, but I shall endeavour for your sake to be more civil on the subject in future.'

Warmed by this, Hannibal decided that the best course now would be a change of topic. 'Have you heard that the Cordells are to hold a party next week? I cannot think that they would presume to invite *us.* They have, after all, come from trade.'

He thought he saw Will hide a smile as he raised his glass to his lips. 'As a matter of fact, I received my invitation this morning. As did the Crawfords.'

This was news, and not at all welcome. 'You shall refuse, of course.'

'On the contrary, we have all accepted.'

Stung, Hannibal could summon no immediate response; but a moment later, all thoughts of the Cordells fled as Will leaned forward in his chair, cradling his glass, and pinned Hannibal with a serious stare.

‘Hannibal, I have a confession to make. The reason that I have not been myself is because I - well, I find myself wholly unable to forget what transpired between us last December.’

This was the very last thing that Hannibal had expected, and it set his heart drumming madly, although outwardly he endeavoured to remain calm. ‘I see.’

‘And as a result, I have found it… difficult to be around you.’

Now a new feeling - a kind of panic - gripped Hannibal. Not the fear of being subsumed by another that had driven him to put emotional distance between them in December, but…

‘Do not go away again.’ The gaucheness with which he blurted out this plea was mortifying, but Will only smiled.

‘I have no such intention.’ His eyes were intent, darkening with emotion as he admitted, ‘But I find that I still want you, you see. Quite desperately.’

For a moment, Hannibal forgot to breathe. ‘What is - to be done about that?’ he managed at last.

Will’s eyes moved over him in slow consideration. ‘Perhaps we might come to… an arrangement of sorts.’

Hannibal drained the last of his whiskey and placed the glass on the carpet by his feet. ‘You are speaking of Nakama?’

Will did the same. ‘I am.’

Nakama. It was a code that had existed for hundreds of years, and it meant that unbonded Alphas and Omegas could enjoy each other freely without expectation of matrimony or bonding. If, at any time, either party wished to break the agreement - usually because they had met someone to whom they wished to pledge their lives - they were free to do so. In most cases, Nakama was practised between those separated by class or station, and always with the greatest discretion. Certainly it was an unorthodox proposition, but then Will had ever been one to push boundaries and thumb his nose at convention. Never would Hannibal have thought to suggest such a thing himself; but as they continued to stare at one another, he found himself becoming shockingly aroused as a multitude of possibilities presented themselves.

Which was why, a moment later, he found himself saying rather unevenly, ‘Very well. I accept.’

Will’s eyes darkened to midnight blue. ‘Are you certain?’

Six weeks of gentle pining turned in a moment to ravenous hunger. ‘Come here,’ he demanded.

And without another word, Will did. Hannibal gazed in wonder and longing at the Alpha who knelt before his chair and, with a sigh, rested his cheek against Hannibal’s knee. Will’s scent and touch both settled and aroused, and Hannibal shifted restlessly.

‘Will.’

‘Hm?’

‘Please.’

He felt a slow exhale, warm through the material of his breeches, before Will lifted his head. ‘Open your legs.’

Such a softly delivered request, yet full of fierce desire. Hannibal felt an answering throb of want and a telltale wetness between his thighs, which he spread without demur. Will pushed immediately between them, and unbuttoned Hannibal’s breeches flap with hands that seemed to shake a little. When the Alpha’s head dipped again, Hannibal’s eyes widened.

Oh.

The first touch of Will’s tongue, a teasing flick, caused Hannibal to grip the arms of the chair. A series of sucking kisses up his length had him suppressing a moan. And when Will took the head within the heat of his mouth and began to suckle strongly, Hannibal could not hold back a deep groan.

Will pulled off and flashed a grin at him. ‘Hush.’

Hannibal decided quickly that the best place for his hands was buried in Will’s hair, and he urged him back down with the growled command, ‘More.’

Never in his life had he experienced pleasure like it. The wicked ways in which he was being pulled towards completion by that lathing, rasping, clever tongue were quite beyond even his most fevered imaginings. He looked down, breathing ragged, hips only prevented from rising by the pressure of Will’s palms on the tops of his thighs. The sight of Will’s beautiful mouth working over his hard, reddened flesh was his undoing, and with a gasp he spilled, fists clenching in dishevelled curls to try to tug Will off. But Will resisted him, and Hannibal could only watch in helpless pleasure until finally, depleted, he hissed with oversensitivity. Slowly then, Will pulled off him, and tucked him back inside his breeches. He looked up and licked lips now red and swollen.

‘Is that better?’

Before Hannibal could gather himself sufficiently to form a coherent reply, Will retrieved the glasses and clambered to his feet. As he went to pour another drink for each of them, Hannibal eyed him covertly. He was wet still with slick. And a prominent stain on the front of Will’s previously pristine breeches betrayed the Alpha’s own involuntary release. Accepting his glass, Hannibal took a quick sip and set it aside. Before Will had time to return to his chair, Hannibal snared him around the waist and pressed his face to Will’s stomach. In truth, he had no words. Only an instinctive need to be close, and a feeling of almost overwhelming tenderness as he breathed in their mingled scents. He felt fingers slip beneath his chin, and on a sigh he lifted his head. Will looked down at him for the longest moment before bending to kiss him. Lips pressed and parted. Tongues slid together, whiskey-warm. The languorous joy of rediscovery was too sweet to soon relinquish, and they kissed with slow enjoyment until

the strident chimes of the grandfather clock brought them to a reluctant halt. Hannibal's eyes half-closed as Will stroked back his hair.

'I should go.'

'You could stay.'

Will shook his head, though his eyes were gentle. 'Not tonight. I have early business with my steward.'

And when Hannibal would have protested, he found himself tugged up into an embrace. Unused to such, he stiffened at first, but quickly melted into the lines of Will's body, and found himself clinging fiercely by the time Will pulled back.

'I think I shall have to devise a way to get you over to Lupus Hall.' Will's eyes glittered a sensual promise. 'And there I shall keep you in my bed for an entire day.'

Hannibal waited for the familiar rush of fear, for the urge to retreat, but felt nothing except a shiver of delight at the picture Will had painted. He leaned in and nipped playfully at the irresistible swell of Will's bottom lip.

'I shall hold you to that.'

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Will spent a restless night, torn between incredulity at the depths of his selfishness and a fear that, having let Hannibal out of his sight, he would find on his next visit to Hartwell that the unpredictable Omega had barred him from the house or, worse, disappeared.

Nakama.

He winced at the memory of how blithely the suggestion had slipped from his tongue. As if he had been thinking of it for some time. As if he had considered carefully all the implications. What would have been Hannibal's reaction if he had known that the idea had come to Will over dinner, as he had sat and forced himself to swallow food for which he had no appetite, so consumed was he by the idea of Randall Tier attempting to lay claim to *his* Omega.

But he is not yours. Admit it - this is a desperate attempt to divert Hannibal from the lure of a younger Alpha.

A pillow over his head did nothing to quiet his taunting inner voice, and he was glad when daybreak came and he could seek constructive employment.

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As morning crept towards noon, Will allowed himself the liberty of walking into the village. Strolling along the main street in the crisp sunshine, he was both pleased and mortified to spy Hannibal outside the Red Dragon Inn. Pleased because merely setting eyes upon the Omega was enough to give him the most immense pleasure - almost troublingly so. Yet mortified

because standing beside his reclaimed lover, talking animatedly, cane swinging in jaunty circles, was none other than the precocious Mr Tier. Squaring his shoulders, Will proceeded towards them, much of his rancour vanishing when Hannibal, upon glancing around, saw him and bestowed upon him a smile of unrestrained pleasure.

'Mr Tier, Hannibal.' Will tipped his hat, and the two younger gentlemen followed suit.

'Good morning, Mr Graham.' Mr Tier went back to studying the facade of the inn, brandishing his cane at the elegant sash windows. 'Mr Lecter and I have been discussing the possibility of hiring rooms at the Red Dragon for our ball. What say you? Is not it an eminently suitable venue for us?'

'It is certainly large enough,' owned Will, trying hard not to bristle at *our* and *us*. 'But the people of Balmore are a sluggish lot, Mr Tier. You will find that it takes a deal of persuasion to tempt them from their firesides, particularly in the depths of winter.'

'Which is why I have decided that this event shall be something different. A costume ball! There now, I have surprised you.' Grinning triumphantly, Mr Tier declared, 'With such inducement, who could resist?'

A great many people, thought Will, wincing inwardly at the very idea. But observing the way that Hannibal's eyes shone at the prospect, he kept his reservations to himself.

They walked on together, Mr Tier slightly ahead because of the narrowness of the pavement. Every now and then, Will's gloved hand brushed Hannibal's, and they darted at each other glances that grew increasingly heated.

As they passed Applewood Cottage, Mr Tier slowed his steps, and Will recalled the mission that the young Alpha had, the previous day, hurried off to fulfil.

'Tell me, Mr Tier, how went your visit with Mr Franklyn and Miss Lounds?'

Mr Tier shrugged. 'It was tolerable. Mr Franklyn is very fond of talking. And I must say, Miss Lounds' appearance has altered markedly since our last meeting. I found her quite ill-looking.'

'Really, Mr Tier.' Hannibal looked at him archly. 'That is rather ungallant of you. And untrue. Miss Lounds may be a little pale, but that is due surely to her colouring rather than any external factors.'

Will's heart swelled with pride at this defence of a person whom Hannibal had admitted to having exceedingly mixed feelings about.

Mr Tier bore his chastisement well, smiling apologetically. 'Of course, that could very well be it. No doubt the poor lighting played some part as well. One thing I shall say for her, Miss Lounds writes very well. In Weymouth, her recitations made her quite the star attraction.'

Hannibal's eyes gleamed with a strange sort of anticipation. 'With anyone in particular?'

It struck Will that Hannibal had already an answer in mind. Mr Tier hesitated, though a slight smile suggested rather less discomfort than his pause indicated.

‘I would not wish to be indiscreet.’

‘Of course not.’ Hannibal cocked his head to one side, a gesture that meant he was intent on prising information from his subject. ‘Although an open appreciation of creative talent is not improper, surely. I have heard,’ he added casually, ‘that two such admirers were close friends of Miss Lounds. Tell me, did you happen to meet Mr and Mrs Zeller? They were, at the time, unmarried, I believe.’

Will watched as, just for a moment, the oddest expression flickered across Mr Tier’s handsome face. ‘Ah, yes. The Zellers. You are quite correct. They were, indeed, vocal admirers of Miss Lounds’ poetry.’

‘One more than the other, perhaps?’

‘Oh, *that* I really could not say.’

‘Hannibal.’ Exasperation warred with unease. ‘This is hardly appropriate conversation.’

Two pairs of laughing eyes fixed on him, and Will felt suddenly every one of the sixteen years that stretched between him and his young lover.

‘At any rate,’ he said briskly, ‘I must be off.’

He was somewhat mollified by the clear disappointment in Hannibal’s eyes and the huskiness of his reply. ‘Must you?’

‘Sadly, yes.’ His softened tone was for Hannibal alone. ‘My steward informed me this morning that his father has died, and in his absence there are urgent estate matters that require my attention. Not least the renovations of the workers’ cottages.’

‘I am sorry.’ Hannibal took a step towards him, his expression conciliatory. ‘I know how important the welfare of your tenants is to you. Of course you must go.’ There was a hint of a mischievous smile as he added, ‘By the by, this morning Uncle Robert and I received our invitation to the Cordells’ party. I hope that we shall see you there.’

Will almost reached for Hannibal’s hand, but caught himself in time. ‘You certainly shall.’

And with one final lingering glance, he wished both gentlemen a good day and took his leave.

'I fear you have greatly misread the situation.'

The week that followed was one of endless tasks and much vexation, but when the day of the Cordells' party dawned, Will was able finally to hand back the reins of management to his newly-returned steward. Desperate to see Hannibal again, he decided against walking the fairly lengthy distance to the Cordells', whose manor was located on the opposite side of the village to Lupus Hall. Instead, he gave instructions for the chaise to be prepared.

In an unusual step, he had ordered new clothes from his tailor, the worldly Mr Prurnell, who exported from London and Paris only the finest materials. And consequently, as he stood before the glass in his dressing room, he was adequately satisfied with the reflection that confronted him. A turquoise silk embroidered waistcoat peeped from beneath a matching jacket of fine wool, the tails brushing the backs of his thighs, which were encased in crisp white breeches. No doubt Hannibal would tease him about having finally shaken free the moths from his purse, but Will found that he could bear the prospect very well if it meant that he could feel for once that he was more of a match for his refined lover.

Another chaise had ascending the avenue ahead of his when just after eight o'clock he arrived at the Cordells', and Will recognised it at once as Robert Lecter's. As his driver pulled to a stop, Will made ready to step out; but before he could move, the door was wrenched open, and the next moment he found himself with a lapful of eager Omega.

'I have missed you,' groaned Hannibal, between frantic kisses. 'This has been the longest week.'

'It has.' Will's hands came up to frame Hannibal's face, tilting it for a better angle. 'Oh, my darling boy, it has.'

The delicious thrust of Hannibal's tongue in his mouth and the warm weight of his slender body were delightful torments, for it would be hours before they could properly satiate the need radiating between them. Even had they been alone and unobserved, the cramped confines of the vehicle, which barely seated two, was the most impractical of venues for a rendezvous. For a few more moments, however, Will allowed himself the sweet indulgence of kissing Hannibal with single-minded thoroughness, until it occurred to him that Hannibal might not have travelled to the Cordells' alone.

'Where is Robert?' he asked, breaking off to nuzzle Hannibal's temple, scenting him with unapologetic hunger. 'Not waiting to go in with us, I hope.'

'He has started with a cold, and felt it politic to remain at home.' Impatiently, Hannibal claimed his lips again.

But there was only so much wriggling that Will could endure before risking an almighty scandal. The close fit of their breeches allowed little mercy for arousal, and the hot press of Hannibal's length rubbing against his thigh was doing little to calm his own ardour.

With great unwillingness, therefore, he pulled back, feeling a secret thrill that it was he who was responsible for the twin stains of colour on Hannibal's cheeks and the drowsy darkness of his lidded gaze. 'Even so, it is time to go in. Anyone might have seen you climb into my chaise.' His tone was only gently reproving, and Hannibal looked not at all chastened.

'Speaking of which,' he commented airily, making no move to shift from Will's lap, though at least he sat now relatively still, the fingers of one hand twined in the hair at Will's nape, 'I am very glad that you came for once as a gentleman should, and not on foot.'

'Perhaps that is your influence.' Amused, Will took a moment to smooth back the hair which had spilled across Hannibal's forehead. 'Mine, it seems, is to put you in a constant state of dishevelment.'

At last, then, they disentangled with mutual reluctance, adjusting their clothing and stepping one after the other from the chaise. Moonlight flooded the driveway, and Will's breath caught as he took in the full impact of Hannibal's autocratic beauty. Clothed in tones of russet and gold, which lent flattering emphasis to the honey shades of his side-swept hair, he strode confidently at Will's side, his bearing as proud as any Alpha's.

'You look exceedingly handsome tonight,' murmured Will as they stood awaiting admittance, and was highly gratified when Hannibal whispered to him in return.

'As do you, my Will.'

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'...my Will.'

The words lingered like sweet wine as Will wandered from room to room, exchanging greetings with this acquaintance and that, in search of no one in particular, wanting only a few minutes of relative solitude to clear his head. Hannibal had been claimed for a game of Vingt-et-un by Mr Tier and a handful of other young Alphas almost as soon as they had walked across the threshold; but in the hazy afterglow of their impromptu tryst, Will had reacted with barely a pang.

He was surprised out of his dream-like reverie by the sight of Anthony conversing with Jack by the drawing room bay window, and he strode across to greet his brother with a warm handshake.

'Well met!'

'Indeed.' Anthony looked him up and down with an approving smile. 'You look very well, brother.'

'Country air, you know.' Will waved aside his brother's praise, all too conscious of what had just occurred to give his complexion so ruddy a glow as doubtless Anthony was seeing. 'So,' he smiled quizzically at his older sibling, 'shall you tell me why you are here and not in London? No trouble at home, I trust?'

‘Will,’ laughed Jack, ‘what a question!’

Anthony rolled his eyes. ‘He was ever thus. Blunt to the point of painful honesty. As it happens, brother dear, I have come on Jack’s recommendation to inspect a nice little property that has just come vacant. Do you know Scarfe Manor?’

‘Of course.’ Will nodded, intrigued. ‘I had heard that old Mr Scarfe was retiring to Bath to live with his daughter’s family. You are considering taking on the lease?’

‘We are. Mischa misses Hannibal and Robert; and I confess that I, too, am tiring of London society.’ Anthony wrinkled his nose. ‘Far too much noise and smoke.’

The prospect of the family reunited at last in one county was highly delightful. Grinning, Will clapped his brother on the shoulder. ‘Come, let us find Hannibal. You can tell him the news yourself.’

Gaming tables had been set up in the salon, but upon brief inspection it appeared that Hannibal was not present among the jocular crowd.

‘Never mind. I can tell him at dinner.’ Turning to Jack, Anthony winked. ‘What say you? Care for a Piquet rematch?’

Will left them to it and went in search of refreshment. A punch table had been set up in the entrance hall, and he was filling a bowl when a sharp bark of laughter from the other side of the vestibule caught his attention. There stood Hannibal with Mr Tier and Miss Hobbs, all huddled together in apparent furtive conversation. Miss Hobbs, prettied and beribboned, was a vision in pink satin. Evidently she, too, had acquired new garments and trimmings for the party, and it was not difficult to guess from whom. In that moment, Will could not help thinking of his dear friend, Matthew Brown, who continued quietly to pine for her. *Poor Matthew. How could you ever hope to compete with all of this?*

Frowning, Will debated whether to approach or avoid the little group; but in the next moment he caught Hannibal’s eye, and the Omega’s warm smile drew him forward.

‘Miss Hobbs, Mr Tier. Mr Lecter.’ His gaze skated over the other two and lingered on Hannibal: those high cheekbones were flushed now with laughter, and an unaccustomed merry tilt to his lips hinted at a level of intoxication that was unusual for the normally reserved Omega. This prompted a surge of protectiveness. ‘Is all well? I had thought that you were at cards.’

‘Mr Graham, such attentiveness! What a good friend you are.’

There did not appear to be malice behind Mr Tier’s words, but neither could Will quite take them at face value. He was considering his response when Miss Hobbs piped up.

‘We have heard such news, Mr Graham! Whatever do you think? A mahogany writing desk was delivered this morning to Applewood Cottage, and no one knows where it has come from!’

‘Except, presumably, Mr Franklyn and Miss Lounds,’ said Will dryly, but the others were shaking their heads.

‘No, indeed, the box was addressed to Miss Lounds, but with no hint as to the identity of its sender.’ Mr Tier directed a sly glance at Hannibal. ‘Of course, there are theories.’

Hannibal’s returning smirk did nothing to set Will at ease. The influence that Jack’s son appeared to wield was greater than he had imagined. And, thus far, he had seen nothing laudable in it.

‘More is the pity.’ He did not attempt to hide his distaste. ‘I wonder that anyone who casts themselves in the role of admirer would make Miss Lounds the easy target of gossip with such ostentatious show.’

‘Oh, come, Will.’ Hannibal was all amusement. ‘We mean nothing by it. And if, as we suspect, the desk is a gift from Mr and Mrs Zeller, well - Mrs Zeller is, after all, Miss Lounds’ particular friend.’

‘And perhaps the same could now be said for *Mr* Zeller,’ murmured Mr Tier.

Will eyed him then with real dislike. It was inconceivable to him that Hannibal, who normally decried discourtesy, was all too ready to overlook - nay, to *encourage* - Randall Tier’s practise of it. The nasty suspicion that this could have anything to do with Mr Tier’s Alphan status was almost too much to stomach. And only the announcement of a fresh group of arrivals prevented Will from making sharp comment. Spying Mr Franklyn and Miss Lounds at the back of the throng, he excused himself and ventured over to greet them. What Hannibal thought of his abrupt departure, he could only guess, but not for anything would he endure another moment of Mr Tier’s smirking presence.

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‘Mr Tier, would you please pass the green beans?’ Head finally clear, Hannibal felt a deal better after having consumed a hearty bowlful of cauliflower soup, and he made a mental note to avoid fruit punch for the foreseeable future. ‘Mr Tier?’

But Mr Tier appeared preoccupied. And when Hannibal followed his line of sight, he saw that the Alpha was looking intently at Miss Lounds.

‘Is anything the matter?’

Mr Tier blinked and returned his gaze to Hannibal. ‘Forgive me, my friend. I could not help but notice how oddly Miss Lounds has arranged her hair.’

Hannibal looked but could see nothing awry. ‘She has no maid to attend her, remember, but it is hardly an objectionable style. Perhaps a little looser than is customary.’

In point of fact, Miss Lounds was drawing admiring looks from most everybody else: titian hair coiled loosely atop her head, high-waisted gown of green velvet a reminder of the status bestowed upon her by her association with the Prices. Hannibal’s gaze travelled on a little

and lighted on Will. He was sitting too far away for conversation, and in any case seemed much engaged with Mrs Cordell and Anthony. Taking the rare opportunity to observe him unnoticed, Hannibal felt a frisson of pride in his lover. How noble was his carriage, how natural and easy his mannerisms. He was, at that moment, arching one satirical brow as he parried words with Anthony, and the sight sent a delicious thrill through Hannibal. The unconscious way in which Will carried his authority was far more alluring than the blustering of an Alpha such as Mr Chilton, who thankfully was away from home with Mrs Chilton visiting his new wife's family.

'Such wonderful news about Anthony and Mischa.' Chiyoh, seated on Hannibal's left, sighed happily. 'The prospect of having both of my former charges living so close by pleases me very much.'

'Yes, Balmore seems to be increasingly popular.'

Hannibal kept his voice low, although Mr Tier was now talking with Abigail. She, dear girl, had blushed to have been seated beside so important a guest. Soon, Hannibal hoped, she would come to feel entirely comfortable, and to believe that she did indeed belong in that sphere.

'And how thankful I am that we have such good people among us to make our new residents feel at home.' Chiyoh gestured towards the far end of the table. 'Will, for instance. Sending his chaise tonight to fetch Mr Franklyn and Miss Lounds, that they might avoid an inclement walk home.'

'Did he? I am not surprised. Will was ever kind.'

Hannibal smiled indulgently. But Chiyoh seemed torn between thoughtfulness and concern.

'Indeed. Still, I wonder…'

'What? Why do you hesitate?'

Chiyoh turned soft brown eyes on him. 'I would not wish to upset - well, I shall just say it.' She looked then between Will and Fredricka Lounds. 'I wonder whether this act betrays more than mere kindness.'

For a moment, Hannibal looked at her blankly. Then, as her meaning sank in, 'Will and Miss Lounds? Oh, no. I fear you have greatly misread the situation.'

'Perhaps. Yet Miss Lounds is of prime marriageable age, and Omegan. And were Will contemplating marriage -'

'Will is *not* contemplating marriage. And Miss Lounds is one-and-twenty, the same as I. Hardly an old maid.' Hannibal's composure was beginning to fray, just a little. The very idea of *his* Will entertaining even the merest of fancies for the shrewish Fredricka Lounds was unthinkable. Ridiculous.

'Will may *say* that he does not wish to marry, but remember that he has an estate to pass on.'

‘Lupus Hall will go to Valentine,’ replied Hannibal shortly.

‘You seem to have it all worked out.’ Chiyoh’s eyes were steady on him. ‘Well, time will tell.’

‘Will is not in love with Miss Lounds.’

‘If you say so.’

This infuriating reply drew from Hannibal a scowl. ‘Will is not in love with *anyone.*’

What was love but pain and disappointment and endless regret? No, Will and he were surely of one mind: Will's suggestion of Nakama was proof enough of that. Yet a seed of doubt had been planted; and after dinner, when everyone gathered in the drawing room, Hannibal watched with narrowed eyes as Will sat down not two places from Miss Lounds. On her other side was, surprisingly, Mr Tier. The reason for this soon became apparent, however. They were in close proximity to the pianoforte; and when an entertainment was suggested, Mr Tier was first to volunteer a beautifully-executed Bach Prelude. Not to be outdone, Hannibal replied with a light-fingered Aria. He returned to his seat flushed with satisfaction but did not allow himself to look at Will as he passed close by. Miss Lounds was next - a recitation of original poetry, which ended thus:

‘How clever is society,
All-knowing and all-judging, we.
True feeling hid behind veiled eyes,
All splendid in polite disguise.’

This drew from the company spontaneous, if somewhat uncertain, applause. Mr Tier, who did not seem at all uncertain, hollered for an encore, at which point Hannibal could not resist directing a glance at Will. To his surprise, Will met his gaze immediately, and winked. The crassness of this gesture was instantly forgiven, soothing as it did the ruffled feelings that Chiyoh’s words had provoked. Some sort of show was required, however, and Hannibal shook his head in mock disapproval. As Miss Lounds selected a second poem from her notebook, Will left his seat and, to Hannibal’s great satisfaction, claimed the empty chair beside his.

‘All alone?’

Hannibal inclined his head. ‘My customary companion was otherwise engaged.’ He kept his tone light.

‘I very much enjoyed your Goldberg Variations.’ Will leaned closed, a teasing lilt to his voice. ‘That choice having nothing, I am sure, to do with Mr Tier’s.’

‘And what of Miss Lounds’ poetry?’

Will shrugged. ‘Clever enough, though perhaps a touch too acerbic for such an occasion. One should try not to bite the hand that feeds one.'

As pleasingly critical as this answer was, Hannibal decided that a little more prodding could do no harm.

‘I heard of your gallantry in sending the chaise for her.’

‘And for Mr Franklyn. Yes, poor man. He has a slight cold, and the wind tonight is devilish.’

Thoroughly satisfied, Hannibal relaxed back into his seat, only to be nettled all over again when, at Mr Tier’s calls for a third recitation from Miss Lounds, Will sat bolt upright and exclaimed indignantly, ‘That fellow thinks of nothing but his own amusement. Miss Lounds will soon be hoarse.’

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The following morning, Mr Tier paid an unexpected call at Hartwell. Hannibal, who had been hoping that the sound of the outer bell heralded Will, put aside his disappointment and abandoned his breakfast to receive his guest in the salon.

There had been no chance of time alone with Will at the end of the party, Anthony’s presence naturally requiring his brother to make the offer of a stay at Lupus Hall. The two gentlemen had seen Mr Franklyn and Miss Lounds off in Will’s chaise, therefore, before setting forth to walk back across the fields. Hannibal had had to be content with one last smouldering look from Will, which had rather frustrated than appeased him.

Mr Tier appeared to be in no greater spirits than himself, and he sank into his chair with a dejected sigh. ‘Well, Mr Lecter, it seems that our ball will have to be postponed for a while.’

‘I am sorry to hear it.’ Hannibal regarded Mr Tier with concern. ‘You are not ill, I hope?’

‘Not I. My aunt.’ Mr Tier’s tone carried more irritation than distress. ‘She has sent word that my presence is required, and so I must be off this instant.’

‘So soon? No time even to call on Miss Lounds and judge whether today’s hair arrangement is an improvement on last evening’s?’ he teased, hoping to alleviate some of Mr Tier’s gloom. It did not suit him, low spirits casting the Alpha in somewhat of a sulky light.

Mr Tier smiled, though in a distracted fashion. ‘Oh, I called at Applewood Cottage on my way here. I would not wish to slight Miss Lounds and Mr Franklyn, given our acquaintance. Indeed, I would not wish to leave Balmore without giving relief to *all* of my feelings.' Here, he broke off, before fixing Hannibal with an earnest gaze. ‘Need I go on? You can hardly be without suspicion, I am sure.’

‘About what?’ Hannibal leaned in closer, though he bore Mr Tier’s scrutiny with a rising unease.

‘My tender regard, of course. Mr Lecter - Hannibal -’ And reaching out, Mr Tier placed a tentative hand on Hannibal’s knee before instantly withdrawing it. ‘I would that I could say all that is in my heart, but I fear that time is against me.’ Rising then, he laughed awkwardly. ‘And now I have embarrassed you.’

‘Not at all, I assure you,’ murmured Hannibal, shaking himself out of his perturbation to accompany his guest out.

But even as they shook hands at the door, exchanging cordial goodbyes, Hannibal felt all the dismay of unwanted discovery.

Randall Tier was in love with him.

'You have been settling that I should marry Miss Lounds.'

When Will had suggested that Anthony should stay with him while arrangements were underway for the lease of Scarfe Manor, little had he realised that almost two months would pass before he could finally send his brother, mission accomplished, on his way. Two months in which his only contact with Hannibal had been at polite gatherings and the odd dinner at Hartwell, to which, naturally, Anthony had also been invited.

Thus it was with very little preamble that, the night of Anthony's departure for London, Will hurried across to Hartwell and all but invited himself in for after-dinner drinks. While this in itself was nothing unusual, what followed was very much so. For almost the instant the drawing room door had closed behind Robert, Will found himself pressing Hannibal up against said door and ravishing the boy's mouth with almost uncontrolled hunger.

'Hannibal,' he groaned, breaking off to suck kisses down the curve of Hannibal's neck, wrenching aside his pristine neckcloth to gain better access. 'This has been torture. I could not have waited another day to have you again.'

Hannibal's hands were busy at Will's waist; unbuttoning his breeches, pulling out his shirt and slipping beneath the hem to glide up his chest. Will felt the seeking pads of fingers on his nipples and arched into the light touch. His freed arousal pressed fiercely against Hannibal's; and even with layers of clothing between them, he could smell the nectar of Hannibal's slick.

'And what of your promise to keep me in bed for a day at Lupus Hall?' Hannibal rubbed shamelessly against him, a wicked glint in his hooded eyes. 'Or had you forgotten?'

'Certainly not,' growled Will, seizing the Omega's narrow hips and stilling them. 'I am biding my time, that is all. Discretion being the better part of valour and all that.'

Hannibal's resulting pout necessitated another thorough kissing. Reckless in his desire, senses filled with Hannibal's taste and scent, Will pushed down the boy's breeches, cupped the pale globes of his bottom and lifted him so that the Omega's thighs were tight around Will's hips. Hannibal kicked off his boots and Will reached down to help tug the breeches off entirely. Strong legs wrapped then around his waist, and Will sought with his fingers that slick, hot hole before guiding the head of his sex to it and pressing in and up.

They moaned into each other's mouths, both slack-jawed with pleasure.

'You… were… made for me,' panted Will, fingers pressing into the flesh of Hannibal's bottom as he penetrated deep and hard. 'So tight; so good.'

'*Will.*'

Hannibal's fingers tangled in his hair, pulling the strands taut. Long, slow strokes became faster and shallower, until with a muffled cry Will came, forehead pressed to Hannibal's shoulder. With a trembling hand, he reached between them and curled his fingers around his

lover's length, fisting in uncoordinated jerks. Three times, four, and Hannibal threw back his head, climaxing with harsh, shuddering breaths.

They dressed again as quickly as lax limbs would allow, moving afterwards in wordless accord to the sofa, where together they sprawled, sipping their previously abandoned wine and exchanging soft caresses.

'What was it that you were saying about discretion?' Hannibal lifted amber eyes to Will, the picture of innocence.

Will snorted. 'Am I to be held entirely accountable, then?'

'Not at all.' A hand trailed lazily across his thigh. 'I would have had your knot.'

'A trifle impractical, given our location.' But Will nuzzled a kiss into his hair. 'My apologies for ambushing you.'

'Have I given you the impression that I was at all reluctant?'

'Quite the contrary.'

'Then an ambush it was not. We are, after all, Nakama.' And there was a smile in his voice.

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Given that their less than discreet activities might well have drawn undue attention from the servants, Will chose for the sake of propriety - however belatedly - not to stay overnight. Hannibal accepted the decision with barely a protest. They were, in any case, to meet the following day at the Crawfords', and there was yet the promise of time alone at Lupus Hall. Will walked home, therefore, with the moon to guide him and the press of Hannibal's farewell kiss lingering on his lips. Yet, as contented as he was, he could not fully silence the voice that mocked him quietly and persistently.

'We are, after all, Nakama.'

What kind of fool's paradise are you living in? How long before Hannibal sees this agreement for the masquerade that it is? A baited hook to catch a mate.

The answer was all too painfully obvious.

He will run.

***

The unexpected presence of Mr Chilton and his good lady at the Brock Hall luncheon was enough of an unpleasant surprise to divert Will from twelve hours of brooding.

'We returned last evening and discovered Mrs Crawford's invitation languishing on the sideboard! Of course, we determined at once to set off despite the rigours of our journey home, did not we, dearest heart?'

‘Naturally.’ Mrs Chilton smiled coolly and lifted her teacup to her lips. ‘One feels an obligation not to disappoint, no matter the personal cost.’

Mr Chilton nodded earnestly, and Will swallowed a derisive snort. How he had come to be trapped with the insufferable couple, he could not fathom, and he felt all the unfairness of it as he caught a glimpse of Hannibal talking with Chiyoh, Miss Hobbs and Miss Lounds on the other side of the room. Whatever it was that he was saying, his audience was clearly hanging on every word, and Will found himself envying them for being permitted the privilege of listening to that rich, musical voice. Wryly, then, he chastised himself. Hannibal had doting admirers enough, and had indeed been spoiled throughout his life by the knowledge that his presence drew people like the sun to wilting blooms. For so long, Will had resisted that glorious power; and now, although he was perfectly content to luxuriate in it in private, he would by no means indulge Hannibal by acting the besotted fool in company. Gradually, he became aware that Mrs Chilton’s attention had also been arrested by the little group.

‘Poor Miss Lounds,’ she sighed. ‘Now there is misfortune indeed. Forced to relinquish all the advantages of good company afforded to her by the Prices, and thrown back to her uncle like a rejected herring.’

‘Now, my love,’ sneered Mr Chilton. ‘One must not be unkind. She has Miss Hobbs for company, as you see.’

Will stiffened. As much as he had once been guilty of a similarly dismissive attitude towards the demure Miss Hobbs, such undisguised mockery was beneath contempt.

‘Indeed.’ Mrs Chilton arched fine brows. ‘Then it is patently clear to me that I must take an interest in Miss Lounds and introduce her to the delights of *good* society.’

Contemplating the abandonment of decorum and the Chiltons in one fell swoop, Will was rescued by the ringing of the gong, and he thanked all the gods when he stalked through to the dining room and found that he had been seated by the head of the table beside Chiyoh, with Hannibal to his right.

‘What was it that you were you discussing with Mr and Mrs Chilton?’ Hannibal regarded him with amusement. ‘You looked in dire need of rescuing.’

‘Hmph.’ Will raised his spoon and cast Hannibal a reproving look. ‘A pity, then, that you were too much engaged in entertaining to offer such help.’

He took a mouthful of pea soup, and almost spat it out again as a hand landed on his thigh and proceeded to creep upwards with dangerous intent.

‘But you are so resourceful, sir. It would have been a pity to have denied you the opportunity to extricate yourself.’

The low purr and sly address combined sent Will’s blood rushing in a rather unfortunate direction.

‘Speaking of which,’ he murmured, flashing a warning look sideways, ‘would you kindly pass the salt?’

In order to do so, Hannibal would have to either drop his laden spoon back into the bowl, which would surely look odd, or remove his hand from Will's thigh. But Hannibal merely tutted.

‘And spoil an already perfect dish? I would not dream of it.’ And he continued sipping serenely as his questing fingertips brushed the growing bulge.

Will swallowed a groan and concentrated on sitting as still as possible. Hannibal rubbed his thumb beneath the sensitive head, back and forth, pressing just firmly enough to torment but not satisfy. As his flesh swelled, Will’s breathing shallowed, and he cursed silently as inevitable wetness threatened to stain the front of his breeches.

‘Now, Hannibal, Will is perfectly entitled to season his food as he sees fit. Do as he asks, dear.’

Chiyoh’s gentle admonishment was enough. One last teasing caress and the delicious torture was over, leaving Will perversely disappointed but at least capable of intelligent conversation once again.

‘What was it that you and the Chiltons were talking about?’ Hannibal nodded discreetly to where the tiresome couple sat, an uncomfortable-looking Miss Lounds between them. ‘Miss Lounds, perchance? She appears to have fallen in with them rather quickly.’

Will frowned, glad of the distraction but perturbed by Hannibal’s tone of derision. ‘And what other choice has been open to her, Hannibal? *You* would not befriend her.’

He felt Hannibal stiffen beside him, heard the edge of displeasure in his reply. ‘I was speaking with her before dinner.’

‘You were speaking *near* her - whether you were actually speaking *with* her is perhaps a matter of opinion. Chiyoh?’

But the gentle lady only shook her head and continued eating her soup. ‘Pray do not involve me in your squabbles. You know that I cannot take sides.’

‘I know that you *will* not, but I shall not argue over semantics.’

‘Am I responsible for the friendships that Miss Lounds cultivates?’ persisted Hannibal. The rising tide of colour in his cheeks was most becoming, although Will mourned that it was annoyance and not pleasure that had put it there. He refused, however, to shift his stance.

‘You know the power of your influence. You can help or harm with a mere look.’

‘Would that were so,’ came the muttered response, but for Chiyoh’s sake, Will let it go.

The potatoes were perfectly serviceable, the lamb exquisitely tender. But sour thoughts of the demure Miss Lounds and her chivalrous protector rendered Hannibal incapable of giving

either his customary attentiveness. Indeed, his resentment only increased as Will's accusatory words echoed in his mind, growing more vociferous with every reverberation. And more fuel was added to the fire of his agitation as he remembered Chiyoh's comment of weeks before.

'I wonder whether this act betrays more than mere kindness.'

So it was that when Will directed at him a rueful smile, leaning in and murmuring, 'I hope you do not mean to cut me for the rest of the evening,' Hannibal could not help but snipe at him.

'I have merely been reflecting on how best I can modify my behaviour now that I know how highly you think of Miss Lounds.'

'Very commendable' replied Will slowly, brow creasing. 'Though I do not believe that I have ever made a secret of my regard for her.'

Hannibal looked at him archly. 'Perhaps the extent of that regard may one day take you by surprise.'

There followed a stunned silence, broken only by Chiyoh's gasp of remonstrance. Will looked from one to the other of them, and when his gaze settled on Hannibal it seemed to contain a discomposing mixture of amusement and bitterness.

'Oh, I see. You have been settling that I should marry Miss Lounds.'

Cheeks aflame, Hannibal nevertheless held his lover's stare. 'I have not the smallest wish for your marrying Miss Lounds. Or anyone,' And then, recollecting himself, he added, 'You would not be at liberty to spend time with us as you pleased if you were married.'

They shared a long look.

'Well, that would never do, would it?' was Will's eventual response, spoken softly.

An odd lump had formed in Hannibal's throat. With difficulty, he swallowed it. 'Not at all.'

But the tension between them had eased, and it was with genuine enjoyment that he consumed the remainder of his dinner.

Afterwards, Hannibal announced his intention to join the ladies in the drawing room directly, leaving the other gentlemen to their cigars and brandy. This Omegan privilege was one which he invoked rarely, but an eagerness to draw from Will more smiles and less disapprobation had led him to formulate a plan. For the remainder of the evening, he would work to keep Miss Lounds from the Chiltons. No matter how little personal pleasure it gave him. He met Will's quizzical glance with a serene look, therefore, and sallied forth.

Unfortunately, Mrs Chilton made a bee line for Miss Lounds the moment the door was closed behind them.

'My dear girl, what is this that I have been hearing? Mr Crawford informed me at dinner that he has spotted you twice this week walking out early in the village near the post office.'

‘What of it?’ was Miss Lounds’ somewhat sharp reply as they walked through to the drawing room. ‘I enjoy walking, and the post office is on my route.’

Mrs Chilton waved her hand dismissively. ‘The post office is neither here nor there. It is the walking that concerns me, particularly given the inclement weather. It is barely April! No, Fredricka, it really will not do.’

Blanching at the unconscionable rudeness of such behaviour, Hannibal felt moved to interject.

‘I am sure that *Miss Lounds knows the benefits of a sturdy umbrella.’*

‘I do.’ Offering him a tentative smile, Miss Lounds went to join Abigail and Chiyoh on the sofa, inserting herself between them as if for protection. ‘My dear friends the Prices furnished me with a particularly stout one before I came back home.’

‘Your uncle would be pleased to hear you refer to Balmore as home.’ Chiyoh smiled gently.

Mrs Chilton, looking bored by the turn of conversation, wandered over to the bookshelves, and Hannibal busied himself with self-congratulations until the gentlemen returned.

Predictably, Mr Chilton ignored everyone else in favour of stationing himself immediately at his wife’s elbow. Chatting animatedly, Jack and Robert strolled over to the fireplace. And Mr Franklyn took a seat by the ladies. Will, to Hannibal’s pleasure, headed straight towards him.

‘You look very pleased with yourself.’ Two glasses in hand, Will offered one to him. ‘What have you been up to?’

Hannibal accepted the brandy with a smug smile. ‘Feeling left out, Will?’

‘On the contrary, I only wish to make certain that you have not been causing mischief in my absence.’

‘You are not my keeper, sir.’ But there was no bite to his words. In truth, the idea that Will had been thinking of him during their short separation was a most pleasant one.

Will smirked. ‘Heaven forbid.’

He touched his glass to Hannibal’s, and as their fingers brushed, Hannibal half-closed his eyes. The greedy thrill of physical contact, even so light as this, coupled with the sweet drift of his lover’s scent, banished instantly all else from his mind and reduced the figures around them to shadows. And Will seemed no less affected, his eyes darkening to cobalt as he swayed closer to whisper, with a softness that made Hannibal ache, ‘I know. Soon, I promise.’

When Jack cleared his throat and asked for silence, it was with no small amount of reluctance that Hannibal tore his eyes from Will's. A hush fell as everyone turned to their genial host, all but Chiyoh wearing expressions of surprised expectation.

‘I have an announcement which I hope will please all of my dear friends.’ Drawing from his coat pocket an unsealed envelope, Jack brandished it triumphantly. ‘It is from my son,

Randall. He tells me that he has at last been given permission to return to Brock Hall, and will do so in only a few weeks' time!'

Mr Franklyn broke into spontaneous applause, a large smile lighting up his excited face. 'Most marvellous,' he gushed. 'I do love surprises, Mr Crawford, and this is an excellent one. Is not it, Fredricka?'

'Yes, Uncle.'

Hannibal's curiosity was piqued by the note of discomfort in Miss Lounds' voice; but a moment later, Mrs Chilton's affected tones rang through the room, demanding the attention of all. Her gaze swept over every person as she spoke, narrowed green eyes fixing on each in turn save Abigail. Hannibal's lip curled in displeasure as he caught the young girl's mortified blush.

'Well, well. It seems that our little society is about to gain a new addition. How marvellous. We must organise a welcome party. Perhaps I might even take it upon myself.'

The inappropriateness of every aspect of this speech rendered Hannibal breathless with indignation. Chiyoh smiled and looked down at her lap. Jack laughed a trifle too heartily. Everyone else seemed hardly to know where to look.

In the awkward pause that followed, Will stepped forward to murmur in amusement close to Hannibal's ear, 'Well, well, indeed. What an interesting summer this promises to be.'

'Oh, but have you seen Hannibal?'

Summer was upon them sooner than anyone had anticipated. Almost overnight, the cold, lashing rain and freezing fog that had characterised March and April gave way to clear skies and balmy morning mists. Buds that had delayed their springtime opening unfurled to create a riot of colour across the village, and the lanes were soon awash with pink blossoms from the perfumed cherry trees that lined every avenue.

Randall Tier's anticipated return had not yet taken place, despite his promise to his father. But, as Hannibal reminded Will while they lay sated and curled around each other in Hannibal's bed one night at the beginning of May, there was no hurrying the redoubtable Mrs Tier.

'Really, Hannibal.' Will stroked a palm down Hannibal's flushed chest, nail catching on a pert nipple and drawing from him a groan. 'Must we discuss Randall Tier's aunt now?'

'You were the one who introduced the subject,' Hannibal reminded him, catching that wicked wandering hand before it could trail any lower.

'I only remarked that at this rate, that infernal ball - which is all that anyone seems capable of talking about these days - will never come off.'

'Now, there you are wrong,' Hannibal informed him smugly. 'Chiyoh told me this morning that Jack has rented the largest rooms in the Red Dragon Inn for the evening of the twelfth, and Mr Tier has promised to be in attendance.' Insinuating one leg between Will's, he arched lazily against him, enjoying the warm friction of skin against skin. 'So I would start looking for a costume if I were you.'

'Hmph. I can think of few prospects less appealing.' Seeking fingers cupped the ripe curve of Hannibal's bottom and dipped between his cheeks. 'Still so wet, my love?'

Heat bloomed in Hannibal's cheeks and he buried his face against the curve of Will's neck, breathing in his sweet Alphan scent in an effort to calm himself. *My love.* It was a mere turn of phrase, of course, but those words from Will's lips were simultaneously elating and terrifying. Seeking comfort in distraction, he pushed back against Will's hand in encouragement. 'It would seem so. You are in dereliction of your duty, *Alpha.*'

'Awful boy!' growled Will, rolling Hannibal beneath him. 'Twice was not enough? I have spoiled you.'

Hannibal squirmed and rubbed against him, arousal spiking once more. 'It was not enough,' he groaned, pulling Will's head down and claiming a fevered kiss from plush lips that opened readily to him. 'It will never be enough.'

As their tongues slid sweetly together, Hannibal's legs fell open and he reached down, guiding into himself the slick head that nudged against his opening, so relaxed from previous penetration that he took Will's pulsing sex in one delicious slide. They gasped simultaneously

and broke the kiss, breaths shuddering. Hannibal spread his legs wider and tilted his hips, an unspoken plea for Will's knot. Like turbulent, bruised clouds before a storm, Will's eyes bore into his, holding him pinned without words as he slid his hands to Hannibal's hips and rocked down, working himself deeper. Hannibal moaned, writhing and panting, losing himself to heat and touch and ever more urgent kisses. Will's knot swelled and pressed against him; and hooking one leg around his lover's slender waist, Hannibal pushed upwards. The exquisite sensation as the knot slipped inside, filling him as nothing else could, drew from him a desperate whimper; and when he felt Will's hand close around his own throbbing sex, stroking him in hard jerks as they climaxed together, he sobbed his pleasure into Will's throat.

Afterwards, they did not speak, but lay together with foreheads touching and bodies entwined. When Will's knot had finally gone down and he made as if to pull away, Hannibal tightened his arms around him.

'Hannibal, I must go. I cannot risk falling asleep here, you know that.' Will's voice was gentle, which for some curious reason made Hannibal's heart ache.

He sighed but relaxed his hold, allowing Will to slip free. 'We could tell Uncle, you know.'

Instantly, Will stiffened. 'That we are Nakama? I do not think so.'

'Why not?' Rising, Hannibal propped himself on one elbow and fixed Will with a challenging stare. 'He knows that we spent my heat together.'

'That was different.' Will reached up and pushed back the hair that clung damply to Hannibal's forehead. 'You had need of me then.'

Hannibal resisted the urge to lean into the touch. 'Semantics. I have need of you now.'

A fleeting smile lit Will's face, and for a moment his eyes shone with a tender light that again squeezed Hannibal's heart in the most peculiar manner. But all too quickly, the light died and Will shook his head.

'It will not do, Hannibal. Your uncle is as enlightened a fellow as I have ever known, but this would disappoint him. And I would not for the world be the cause of that.'

Hannibal scowled. 'Nakama is a recognised practice.'

'Perhaps.' Will looked at him sombrely. 'But it is not something that Robert would want for you, and I think you know that.'

A strange fear, that perhaps Will was leading up to his own rejection of their arrangement, caused the instinctive protest to die in Hannibal's throat, and without further argument he allowed Will to leave the bed and retrieve his scattered clothes.

Rolling onto his stomach, Hannibal rested his chin on folded arms, watching in brooding silence as his lover dressed. When Will returned to bestow a kiss on the top of his head, Hannibal tilted his face.

‘No,’ he said huskily. ‘Kiss me properly.’

The slightest hesitance was followed by a flare of hunger in dark-fringed eyes, and Will bent to claim Hannibal’s mouth in a ferocious kiss that was pure possessiveness. Fiercely, Hannibal returned the kiss, intoxicated by his Alpha’s taste, sucking on his tongue greedily. When finally they parted, the dazed shock that Hannibal felt at his lack of control was mirrored in Will’s passion-darkened gaze.

‘Hannibal, I -’

‘You had better go. It will be light soon.’ Abruptness was his shield, protection against whatever apology or platitude Will was readying to serve up. Yet a reluctance to spoil their interlude at its end prompted him to soften the dismissal. ‘Come back for afternoon tea. I can help you with costume ideas for the masquerade.’

A faint smile curved Will’s lips. ‘I *shall* come for tea - *despite* the incentive you offer.’

Before straightening up, he nuzzled against Hannibal’s cheek, and Hannibal felt a thrill all the way down to his toes when Will whispered, ‘All you need ever offer is yourself, my beautiful Omega.’

It was with much tumult of feeling that Hannibal watched his lover’s departure. His resentment at having to part with him was not inconsiderable, yet in his heart he knew that Will was right. For all of Uncle Robert’s liberality, when it came to his own family he was fiercely protective. And although this present arrangement suited Hannibal very well, the possibility of its lowering Will in his uncle’s estimation was absolutely unthinkable.

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Nine days later, Will cursed as he stood before his looking glass, wrestling with the ties of an absurdly tight pair of red hose. Finally he managed to secure them to the braies that would, once he had donned his scarlet tunic, be hidden underneath.

‘Your poulaines, sir.’

‘Thank you, Stammets.’ Will took from his valet the sharp-pointed shoes, eyeing them with some trepidation. ‘These toes are ridiculously long. How am I meant to dance in them?’

‘Carefully, I would say, sir.’

Rolling his eyes, Will slid his stockinged feet into butter-soft leather. An ermine-lined velvet cloak was the final touch, and he stood patiently as Stammets fastened the gold clasp. Standing back, the usually reserved manservant nodded with satisfaction.

‘Yes, that will do very well.’

‘I should hope so.’ Balefully, Will inspected his reflection. ‘Finding anything at only a week’s notice was something of a miracle. It seems that the entire village has lost its senses over this ball.’

Stammets only nodded sagely, turning his attention to the bed and Will's strewn clothes. He gathered them up, and Will pretended not to hear his reproving tut upon discovering several grass stains on the seat of the breeches. His cheeks warmed at the recollection of how they had come to be there - if asked, he would of course blame Virgil for causing him to take a tumble in the meadow behind Hartwell…

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The air was rich with sensual scents, and vibrating with expectation, as Will stepped into the vast room which spanned much of the second floor of the Red Dragon Inn. It sparked with candlelight, throwing a myriad of odd shadows onto the toile wallpaper. Elaborate wigs and hook-nosed Venetian masks were transformed via silhouette into coiled snakes and bear claws. And a degree of anonymity had lent the good people of Balmore a hint of recklessness. Laughter was more raucous, dancing more vivacious, gestures more extravagant than was generally the custom.

Familiarity being what it was, Will recognised most of his intimate acquaintances without any trouble. Anthony and Mischa, who had only a few weeks earlier taken possession of Scarfe Manor, had still found time to make a proper go of things, and were currently parading around the perimeter of the room in grand fashion as the doomed King Louis the Sixteenth of France and his unfortunate wife, Marie Antoinette. Bewigged and bejewelled, they were quite the attraction, although by no means the only guests to draw admiring glances. Jack and Chiyoh, as Caesar and Cleopatra, had gathered quite a crowd around them; watched, Will noticed with amusement, by the scowling Chiltons whose personas of Bluebeard and his wife struck him as peculiarly appropriate.

The one person whose form Will could not identify was Hannibal's, and he wandered through to the first of two smaller adjoining rooms, seeking him with increasing impatience. Returning bereft to the main chamber, he spied Robert in conversation with the young Miss Hobbs, and shaking off his disappointment he approached them with a smile of greeting.

'Robert, Miss Hobbs - or should I say Zeus and Red Riding Hood?'

'Very good,' beamed Robert. 'And I would hazard that you, dear Will, are a knight. One of King Arthur's order, perhaps?'

'Sir Galahad.' Will shrugged self-deprecatingly. 'I underestimated how much effort everyone would go to.'

'Oh, but have you seen Hannibal?' Eyes bright beneath the hood of her russet cloak, Miss Hobbs grinned. 'No one else looks half so grand!'

'Ah, the innocent bluntness of youth,' chuckled Robert. 'It is, however, true that my nephew outshines us all tonight. Quite literally!'

Will was busy parsing this intriguing statement when Miss Hobbs exclaimed, 'There he is, just coming in with Mr Tier.'

Overcoming an irrational stab of annoyance, Will looked - and froze.

What decadent dream is this?

Hannibal. It was unmistakably he, despite the long wig of tumbling, burnished curls that hid his own short, straight hair, and the heavy mask which he held before his face. *Hannibal.* A shimmering glory in gold from head to toe. He wore a form-fitting silk doublet, embroidered with stars and suns, which tapered to a mid-thigh skirt of starched pleats. Beneath, gold stockings clung quite shockingly to legs adorned at the knee with ribbon garters, and feet encased in high-heeled gold shoes. Emblazoned on chest, garters and shoes was the repeated motif of the sun, its twisted rays stretching out halo-like. And atop the wig, an extravagant arrangement of gold-dyed ostrich feathers was set into a crown with radiating points.

Hannibal moved through the room with the vanity of one who knows that all eyes are upon him. At his side strutted Randall Tier, bedecked in a velvet-trimmed form-fitting coat of grey, face concealed by a silver mask of lupine design. They made a dazzling pair; and when Mr Tier placed a white-gloved hand on Hannibal's arm and leaned in to murmur something, Will felt all the choking unpleasantness of noxious jealousy.

Relief came in the form of a slight commotion at the main door. It quickly became apparent that Mr Franklyn and Miss Lounds had just arrived and that Mr Franklyn, wearing mouse ears, whiskers and a long leather tail that appeared to have been sewn to the back of his breeches, had tripped over said tail in the doorway.

'No, no,' he protested, laughing, as a tall, distinguished-looking gentleman dressed as a fox, whom Will recognised as Mr Budge, master of the village boys' school, stepped forward to offer his arm. 'Please do not trouble yourself. It is nothing, truly. I am still in one piece and - oof.'

This last exclamation was accompanied by a wince and a hasty rebalancing - evidently, Mr Franklyn had done some minor damage to his ankle.

'Please, allow me to help you to a chair.'

Mr Budge's charming smile accomplished the almost impossible - it rendered Mr Franklyn silent. While he leaned meekly on his saviour, Miss Lounds hovered behind them. It warmed Will to observe Miss Hobbs approach the apprehensive-looking lady and coax her forward.

Perhaps I have underestimated this protégé of Hannibal's.

HIs gaze swung back to the chief object of his thoughts, and it was with gladness of heart that he saw Hannibal approach him alone.

'Good evening, Sir Knight.' The words were husky and slightly muffled by the mask which Hannibal still held before his face.

Will bowed slightly. 'Sir Galahad, if you please. I must congratulate Your Majesty on this fine show.' His eyes were warm, though he stiffened slightly at Hannibal's reply.

'It was really all Mr Tier's doing.'

‘And where is Mr Tier? He was attached to your side not a moment ago.’

Hannibal waved a dismissive hand. ‘The organiser must circulate, you know.’

In the periphery of his vision, Will caught sight of the wolfish Alpha, now conversing with Miss Hobbs and Miss Lounds. Mr Tier was gesturing at the latter’s glittering train and feathered mask. It was impossible to decipher what he was saying, but Miss Lounds’ cheeks were decidedly hectic.

‘A phoenix. Interesting choice,’ murmured Will.

‘As is the case with most artists, Miss Lounds has a taste for the dramatic.’

But Hannibal’s eyes were on Will as he spoke, and when the Omega lowered his mask, Will forgot all else.

Two spots of rouge slashed across the porcelain whiteness of Hannibal’s face, bringing into stark relief the high jut of his cheekbones. And his lips… His lips had been painted into a small red pout, a scarlet bow that Will longed to press his own mouth against and smudge and lick his way past to taste the sweetness within…

‘Mr Lecter, shall we open the dance?’

Randall Tier, mask in hand and looking decidedly put out, materialised at Hannibal’s side and held aloft his hand in such peremptory fashion that the people nearest to them stopped their conversation and glanced at him in surprise. A flash of annoyance crossed Hannibal’s face, but he accepted Mr Tier’s hand and glanced at Will in apology before being led onto the floor. Will resisted the urge to march over, grab Randall Tier by the coat collar and hurl him from the premises, instead smiling reassurance at Hannibal. Etiquette had demanded acceptance of the invitation, of course, but the true motivation behind Hannibal’s uncharacteristic meekness would almost certainly have been the desire to avoid causing mortification to Jack, and by extension, Chiyoh.

He is growing up.

And what pleasure it gave Will to acknowledge it.

'I am content to admire him from afar.'

Wherever Mr Tier's attentions were, they were not on *him.* Hannibal had discerned as much within five minutes of their reunion. Oh, his companion had talked just as freely and just as flirtatiously as before. But his gaze, instead of being reserved for Hannibal, had roamed about continuously. Restless, searching. And although it came largely as a relief to know that Mr Tier's feelings had not survived their separation, still some fragment of pique remained.

How fickle is love.

But on a night such as this, disagreeable thoughts were not to be entertained. And as they proceeded down the dance, Hannibal allowed his own attention to drift. Most people were engaged as they were, the room now ringing with the sounds of heels clicking on oak and the soft susurrus of swishing fabric; but a few lingered on the fringes, content to observe rather than participate. And one of those few was Will.

How handsome he is. All understated refinement and quiet power.

In stark contrast, Mr Chilton stalked about hither and thither, following his wife's progression in the dance with an embarrassing lack of subtlety. No wonder, thought Hannibal, her unfortunate dance partner kept missing his steps. Respite came in the form of Chiyoh, who approached Mr Chilton with a querying look. Her guise as the Queen of the Nile succeeded in halting his ostentatious pacing; and Hannibal watched with interest as Chiyoh gestured as if to enquire why Mr Chilton himself were not dancing. Contriving to draw nearer, Hannibal easily steered his distracted partner close enough to catch Mr Chilton's obsequious reply.

'If a pirate may dance with a queen, then I would be all too happy to oblige you.'

'I am not dancing tonight,' replied Chiyoh, with a smile of apology. 'But I see that Miss Hobbs is at present without a partner. Perhaps -'

'Ah, Miss Hobbs.' These words, and the grimace which accompanied them, were observed not only by Hannibal and Chiyoh, but also by the poor girl herself, for she sat only a little distance away. 'Sadly, I fear it is past my power to remedy *that* situation. You will forgive me.' And with an abrupt bow, off strode Bluebeard in search of his bride.

Mortification was not a sufficient word to describe Hannibal's feelings in that moment. A rush of anger tightened his lips and lent a snap to his footsteps. He felt Randall Tier's eyes on him in query, but his focus was entirely on the downcast face of his dear young friend. How little she had deserved such disrespect, and how it pained Hannibal to realise that the snub had been, in all likelihood, intended also to injure *him.*

Because of my mistaken pride, Abigail has been subject to public humiliation.

But before he could sink too far into self-recrimination, Hannibal watched with surprised pleasure as Will, appearing as if from nowhere, stationed himself in front of Abigail, bowed,

and offered her his hand. She, who only a moment before had seemed lost to misery, smiled in delight, placed her gloved hand in Will's, and allowed him to lead her to the set.

As he watched them together, light-footed and cheerful, a fierce surge of pride almost stole Hannibal's breath. And something else - a nameless feeling that warmed him to his toes and quickened his heart until he felt that it might float from his chest. With one simple gesture of kindness, Will had transformed Abigail's fortunes; already, Hannibal could see the great and the good of Balmore society viewing her in a new light, and it was with grim satisfaction that he watched Mr Chilton slink further away, red-faced.

My Will. Sir Galahad, indeed!

Another half dozen turns, and supper was announced. In a slow and steady stream, the guests began their exodus through to the private dining room, but Hannibal hung back, hoping for the opportunity of speaking with Will. With so many people on the move at once, however, spotting the Alpha proved to be rather difficult,and he was on the point of giving up when he found his hand snared and himself tugged unceremoniously behind a pillar. There was no doubting the identity of his captor, and he sank gladly into Will's embrace. Hands framing Will's face, he pressed his lips once to the Alpha's, then again with a sigh of pleasure as Will's lips opened readily to him.

'Thank you,' murmured Hannibal, between soft and ever more lingering kisses. 'What a true gentleman you are.'

Will's eyes flashed fire. 'Chilton deserves a thrashing for his rudeness. Honestly, Hannibal, what did you ever see in the man?' Capturing Hannibal's bottom lip between his teeth, he nipped gently, and Hannibal threaded his fingers through Will's hair, holding him at bay.

'Clearly I was mistaken in Mr Chilton, but must you scold me as if I were still in the nursery?'

'Oh, that is not at all my intention.' An enigmatic smile, and Will slid suddenly to his knees.

Hannibal looked down at him, askance.

'Whatever are you doing?'

A redundant question, given that deft fingers were already working open his breeches; and before he could do more than gasp in surprise, Hannibal found himself exposed first to the air and then to the hot suction of Will's mouth. He stifled a groan, horribly aware that only a thin dividing wall separated them from the rest of Balmore society. Yet he could no more have pulled away than he could have prevented himself from tugging Will closer, fingers tightening in dark curls as he surrendered to exquisite pleasure. Will sucked him down with the most obscene slurps, his tongue flattening against the underside of Hannibal's rapidly filling length. Deeper he took him, and deeper still, and when at last he pulled back, Hannibal's sex was red and engorged. Will swiped his mouth with the back of his hand and looked up, blue eyes gleaming wickedly.

‘Worshipping you. Is not that the point of all this?’ He gestured at Hannibal’s costume, and self-consciously Hannibal made as if to remove the ornate crown and wig, but Will stayed his hand. ‘No, my King. I would have you no other way tonight.’ And a strangely tender light shone in his eyes as he added huskily, ‘You are radiant.’

Will bent his head to recapture the blushing tip, lapping greedily at the sweetness that welled from the slit. The beautiful moans breaking from his Omega filled him with unrepentant pride, and he suckled harder. Only for *him* would Hannibal make such sounds, he vowed fiercely. Only *he* would feel the tight clench of Hannibal’s fingers in his hair as the boy came apart, flooding his throat with warm stickiness that he swallowed with possessive smugness. He mouthed kisses against the trembling muscles of Hannibal’s stomach, sliding his arms around his boy’s waist even as Hannibal clung to him in return, breath coming in harsh pants. Will’s own arousal was almost incidental - it was enough to have claimed Hannibal in this most basic of ways, to have pushed him to shuddering completion, boneless and drowsy and, beneath powder and paint, almost painfully young.

Then Hannibal was sinking to his knees before Will, reaching for him, only for Will to grasp his seeking hands and bring them to his lips. ‘No, my love. This was for you.’

He saw the flare of conflicting emotions in dark eyes at the endearment, words that he had uttered once before to similar effect. And he wished, with sudden frustration, that just for once Hannibal would reply in kind. But, although the boy’s fingers squeezed momentarily around his, the inevitable gentle withdrawal began, and Will pushed down his disappointment with a concerted effort. It had at least cooled his ardour, and he noticed Hannibal eyeing him with a mixture of puzzlement and concern as Will rose and straightened his clothing without another word, smoothing back his ruffled curls with hands that were gratifyingly steady.

‘If we are lucky, we may join the others without arousing comment.’

‘And if there *is* comment?’ Hannibal sounded almost sullen as he, too, clambered to his feet. .

‘Then we shall say that we felt the urge to take the air before dinner.’ Will held out his hand, but Hannibal brushed past him. ‘Hannibal?’

‘Yes, yes, that should suffice.’

Brat.

For a reckless instant, Will debated tumbling them both into the nearest chair and hauling the sulking Omega over his knee. Instead, he grasped Hannibal’s hand, forcing him to a stop. ‘Come, now. Out with it.’

Ignoring the imperious glare he received for his trouble, Will stepped closer still. ‘Well? What has offended you?’

‘Do not hector me,’ snapped Hannibal, but his eyes conveyed more of uncertainty than anger.

With a sigh, Will cupped his cheek, taking care not to smudge the carefully-applied powder. ‘You know that I am just as stubborn as you. You might as well tell me now and save yourself

further *hectoring.*'

'It is nothing.' But the edge had dissipated from Hannibal's voice, and he looked at Will almost plaintively. 'You seemed - unaffected.'

The note of vulnerability melted Will's heart. Holding Hannibal's gaze, he replied tenderly, 'Oh, my dearest boy, I assure you that I was very *much* affected. Why else would I have stolen you away for such an interlude?'

A look of doubt followed; but before further explanation could be made, the door opened and a servant passed them, carrying an empty salver.

'Come.' Will squeezed Hannibal's hand. 'We should go in before there is nothing left.'

He received only a huff in response, but Hannibal did not slip his hand free until after they were seated, and the warmth of this gesture lingered with Will throughout the remainder of the meal.

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There was so much to reflect on, so many moments to dissect and inspect, that Hannibal was up and out the next morning, walking the grounds before the sun had fully dried the dew. With Virgil trotting at his heels, uttering the occasional contented shriek at having finally the freedom to roam the estate once again, Hannibal was startled back to the present only when two figures emerged from around the side of the house - Abigail Hobbs and Randall Tier. This would have been unusual enough, but the fact that Mr Tier appeared to be supporting Abigail beneath her elbow as she limped forward made it doubly so.

'Whatever has happened?' Hastening to meet them, Hannibal led the way back into the house.

'Nothing too alarming,' was Mr Tier's cheery response, though the care that he took to settle Abigail onto the drawing room sofa belied his dismissive mien. 'I met Miss Hobbs on the road from the village; and as she seemed to be in some difficulty I thought it best to bring her here.'

'You were perfectly correct.' Gaze falling to Abigail's muddied stockings and slightly puffy ankle, Hannibal paused. 'Are those your new shoes, Abigail? I would not have advised wearing them on our rough roads.' They were, indeed, the same delicate shoes that she had worn at the ball, and Hannibal looked at her reprovingly, but she was at that moment smiling gratefully up at Mr Tier.

'I cannot think what I would have done, had not you come along at that moment.'

'My dear Miss Hobbs, think nothing of it.' The hero of the hour took her hand, patted it, and flashed a grin at Hannibal. 'Who would have thought that country life could be so exciting, eh?'

'Hm.'

It transpired that Mr Tier was on his way to fulfil a commission for his father, and he took his leave shortly afterwards. Hannibal rang for refreshments to be brought in.

‘A cup of sweetened tea will help lessen the shock. How did it happen?’

Abigail coloured. ‘You were right, Hannibal. I should not have attempted to wear these silly shoes out of doors. It is just that I -’ She sighed, and looked pensive for a moment. ‘But no matter.’

Growing more intrigued by the moment, Hannibal took a seat beside her on the sofa. Careful not to push her into further discomfort, he gentled his tone.

‘You seem not quite yourself today, Abigail.’

‘Oh, Hannibal.’ Again, it seemed that Abigail was on the verge of a confession of some sort, but the servant arrived with the tea, and the flustered girl transferred her attention to pouring out two cups.

Hannibal accepted his with amusement. ‘My dear girl, you must learn to allow others to serve you. Certainly you shall have to once you are married.’

It seemed to him that Abigail’s hand trembled slightly as she added a second lump of sugar to her own cup. ‘I shall never marry.’

This was news indeed. And although Hannibal did not for one moment take it seriously, he was moved to say, ‘I hope that this resolution is not due in any measure to Mr Chilton. After last night, in particular, he is unworthy of so much as another thought.’

Abigail blinked. ‘Mr Chilton? Oh, dear me, no! He is *far* superior to -’ Again she stopped, stirring her tea in a hectic manner that had Hannibal wincing for the fine china.

‘Am I to gather that someone else has at last supplanted Mr Chilton in your affections?’ No prospect was more pleasing - provided, of course, that that someone was not Mr Brown.

A solemn nod, and Hannibal pressed on. ‘Someone superior, you say. Should I gather from this that you refer to social rank?’

‘I do.’ Huge blue eyes fixed on him. ‘And I do not for one moment hope for reciprocation. My gratitude is such that I am content to admire him from afar.’

Gratitude?

Suddenly, all was clear. Hannibal recalled how secure and possessive had been Mr Tier’s hold on Abigail’s elbow - how attentive he had been, arranging the sofa cushions behind her. And how fortuitous was the timing! Had Abigail made this confession mere days before, Hannibal would have feared her set for yet another disappointment. But the Randall Tier of last night and this morning was definitively no longer in love with Hannibal. Had he already transferred his affections to Abigail? Had *she* been the object of his attentions at the ball? It had been clear that he had been seeking *someone.* Had that someone been Hannibal’s dear friend?

Testing the waters, Hannibal commented, as casually as he was able, ‘It is true that the service he rendered you would be enough to capture anyone’s heart.’

Abigail’s hand flew to her mouth. ‘You have guessed it,’ she whispered. ‘Oh, Hannibal, I cannot tell you all that I felt when I saw him coming. Misery turned to happiness in a moment. Never shall I forget it.’

As tempted as Hannibal was in that moment to congratulate Abigail and begin planning her nuptials to Randall Tier, the wretched memory of the Chilton fiasco held him in check. Not only that, but the thought of what Will might have to say on the subject loomed large in his mind. Knowing of Will’s fondness for Mr Brown, and still sensitive to his lover’s accusations of interference in the lives of others, he made a silent resolution to allow *this* situation to play out as fate would have it. One final word, then, was all that he would permit himself. Taking Abigail’s hands in his, Hannibal regarded her with as serious a look as he could muster.

‘Then I shall just say this, Abigail. Knowing the gentleman as well as I do, I think it a fine thing for you to have set your heart on him. He is certainly a much better prospect than a mere clergyman, and far more deserving of you. Yet let us not speak of this again until you know *his* feelings. Remember that we have been mistaken before. No name, therefore, shall pass our lips until such time as it is warranted.’

A press of hands was all that was required to seal the bargain between them, and the conversation turned naturally when Uncle Robert wandered in to join them.

'You may rely on my discretion.'

This had not been, Will had to own, one of his better ideas. Of course, the seed had been planted months since, when first he had teased Hannibal with promises of holding him captive at Lupus Hall. Yet although Hannibal had come to Lupus Hall at last, the presence of a dozen other people made the sort of intimacy that Will had dreamt of for them completely impossible. The scheme had come about during one of their morning tête-à-têtes in the parlour at Hartwell, when they had given in to the temptation of sharing an armchair, which had led rapidly to heated kisses and much more besides, only for them to be thrown into mortification by the sudden advent of Robert to retrieve some book or other. Despite the fact that they were by that point reasonably presentable, and had separated hastily the moment footsteps at the door had heralded Robert's arrival, a desperate attempt at deflection had seen Will blurting out a plan to invite a few select friends to Lupus Hall for a day of strawberry picking. Robert's enthusiasm for the idea had ensured that news of the venture had spread by word of mouth with alarming speed, as a result of which *a few friends* had multiplied rapidly to twelve, and finally fourteen when the Chiltons had somehow managed to invite themselves along.

Still, watching Hannibal move comfortably through the spaces that Will loved, showing in exploratory touches and admiring glances his appreciation for Will's possessions and tastes, made it almost worth the prospect of a day of Mr Franklyn's nervous giggles, Mr Tier's arrogant posturing, and Mrs Chilton's impertinent questions. Almost.

'I see there have been a few additions since last I was here.' Hannibal stepped back, boots clacking on the polished oak floor of the saloon, to run a critical eye over Will's latest acquisition - a startling watercolour of a naked, smiling young man atop a rock, the canvas flooded with colour, the subject demanding worship with outstretched arms and the most alluring of smiles. 'Is this a Blake?'

'You have a good eye,' murmured Will, coming to stand beside him and surveying the painting with renewed pleasure. In truth, it had been the resemblance of the subject to a certain Omegan boy that had seen Will throw caution to the wind when he had come across the piece in a fashionable gallery during his last visit to the capital. 'It is a recent purchase, however. Little else has changed in two years.'

'Has it been so long?'

The hint of pink in Hannibal's cheeks was, Will decided, utterly charming. Still, he wanted instinctively to put his lover at ease.

'I have given you little reason to seek me out here. I am, after all, at Hartwell almost daily.'

'But Lupus Hall is part of you,' murmured Hannibal, eyes tracking the room. 'I would know it all.'

Will looked as well, trying to see his home through Hannibal's eyes. Although here there were none of the Adam fireplaces and marble floors characteristic of Hartwell's cool

elegance, he felt nevertheless a deep pride in the ramshackle Elizabethan manor house with its labyrinthine corridors and walnut-panelled walls, many of which were graced with intricate designs of flora and fauna carved by the great Gibbons himself. It was only after several moments of silence that the significance of Hannibal's words penetrated fully, and he turned to him with eyes full of tenderness.

'Hannibal, I -'

But raised voices drew the attention of both to the doorway.

'Now, Fredricka, you really must not be so stubborn!'

'It is not stubbornness but patience. I am determined to stay with my uncle and finish my book. And when it is done, I shall send it to every publisher in London until one of them accepts it.'

'But, my dear girl, that is highly unlikely!'

Cursing silently the unwelcome intrusion of early arrivals - and doubly so when the persons in question were a rather flustered-looking Mrs Chilton and an uncharacteristically stony-faced Miss Lounds - Will strode forward to greet them.

'Forgive me, I did not hear a carriage.'

'We walked. Mr Chilton and Mr Franklyn are just behind us,' replied Mrs Chilton shortly, casting a frosty glance at her companion even as she addressed Will. 'William, dear, I must entreat you to talk sense into Fredricka, for she is determined not to listen to me!'

Will heard Hannibal's quiet hiss of outrage at the formidable lady's familiarity and, offering his arm to her in lieu of a scene, he suggested hastily, 'Let us go into the drawing room. Mr Lecter is much better than I at giving advice.'

They found Robert standing with a red-cheeked but cheerful Mr Franklyn, and a rather more sour-looking Mr Chilton, both of whom were gulping down cloudy lemonade from large goblets. Will nodded to the attending servant to offer the same to Mrs Chilton and Miss Lounds. Hannibal, he knew, had not the taste for it, and was provided instead with his favourite cordial.

'My word, Mr Graham, this is capital!' Mr Franklyn's loud smack of satisfaction drew the eyes of all in the room, but Will for one did not begrudge him it.

'On such a day as this, you will require plenty of refreshment. The strawberry beds have yielded a great deal of fruit this year.'

It did not take long for most of the remaining guests to arrive: Jack and Chiyoh in their carriage with Abigail Hobbs, whom they had graciously offered to collect on their way past the Verger-Blooms' school; and finally, Anthony and Mischa, who had left the children within the cool stone walls of Scarfe Manor. Still unaccounted for was Randall Tier, whom Will considered to be no great loss, although Hannibal's persistent mentions of him and of all

the possible reasonable explanations for his lateness as he escorted Miss Hobbs outside were irritating enough for Will to wish that the confounded Alpha *would* appear, if only so that Hannibal would cease talking about him.

Chairs had been arranged beneath a broad oak, and the first to take possession of a shady spot was Chiyoh, who seemed a little tired but was, in all other respects, in fine form. Mrs Chilton stationed herself at Miss Lounds' side throughout the first half hour of fruit picking, and Will's sympathy for the younger grew as the elder resumed her earlier badgering.

'My beloved Pater is acquainted with three families at the least who are desirous of Omega companions for elderly relations. Your sort are generally so calming, it makes you ideal for such a position.'

If the words themselves had not been so insulting, Will would have laughed at the notion of *Hannibal* being considered calming. Never had Will known anyone who could stir him with such rapidity to a frenzy of feeling. Fortunately, the object of his affectionate thoughts was too far away to have heard Mrs Chilton's lamentably rude sentiments. Miss Lounds only tightened her lips and pulled more vigorously at the plant she was denuding of its ripe contents. Looking around, Will caught Miss Hobbs looking at him with a pleading expression, for Mr Chilton was slowly edging his way towards her, and as she was kneeling at the furthest end of the bed, there was nowhere for her to escape to. In fairness, it seemed to Will that the clergyman was simply lost in his determination, voiced earlier, to be the first to fill his basket, but the memory of the poor girl's recent humiliation prompted him to hasten across to join her.

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'Is Chiyoh quite well?' Hannibal's fingers brushed lightly over a plump strawberry, and he inhaled its delicate fragrance with enjoyment before breaking it from its stem with one quick twist. 'She tires easily lately.'

Jack stood beside his own half-full basket, fanning himself with his broad-brimmed hat. He looked over towards his wife, who was now in conversation with Robert, and smiled. 'She is fine, Hannibal. The heat does not agree with her, that is all.'

'I am relieved to hear it.'

In truth, everyone seemed to be flagging a little, although Will appeared lively enough still, engaged as he was in conversation with Abigail. Hannibal watched them both for a moment, warmth flooding him at the sight of his lover making such an effort with the girl whom he had once dismissed as unworthy of Hannibal's time and attention.

Refreshments were now absolutely necessary; and when the gong sounded, the whole party trooped indoors. Still there was no sign of Mr Tier, which made Hannibal doubly glad that Abigail was so diverted. Anxious not to do anything that might prompt her to recall her erstwhile suitor, he seated himself away from his young friend and Will, satisfied for now to talk quietly with Anthony and Mischa, and knowing that Will would come to him soon enough at Hartwell, should no more opportunity for intimacy present itself for the remainder of the day. This certainty, and the anticipation that it created, provoked in him a restless sort

of happiness, and when the table had been cleared of the remains of bread, ham on the bone, pies and cheeses, Hannibal sought a few minutes of solitude to compose himself.

The tranquil cool of the entrance hall provided excellent views to both front and back, the main doors having been flung open in an effort to diffuse the stultifying atmosphere. Hannibal gazed for a moment at the gentle slopes and natural wildness of the rear gardens, so unlike the cultivated discipline of Lecter properties. The rest of the party were by now smudges of pastel, walking in sedate fashion down towards the lake. It was, he decided, all so very *Will* that he could not but love everything about this chaotic jumble of an estate.

His attention then turned to the front of the house, and a distant sound of horse's hooves on the concealed road beyond the gates.

'Mr Lecter. Forgive me, but I wonder if I might ask a favour of you.'

Most unexpected was Miss Lounds' appearance at that moment. Evidently just returned from the garden, she approached Hannibal with a look of strain that caused him to frown.

'Of course, Miss Lounds. I will help if I can.'

She pressed a hand to one rosy cheek. 'Thank you. You are very kind. I am - wearied, Mr Lecter, and I would return home for an hour of solitude. Please inform my uncle that I am gone only when it is strictly necessary.'

'Are you sure that nothing ails you? Are you - forgive me, but as a fellow Omega I hope it is not too impertinent of me to ask - are you suffering from -'

Never had Hannibal seen the usually self-contained Miss Lounds so lacking in composure, but she only shook her head with quick vehemence.

'It is nothing like that. I require only to be by myself for a little while.'

Given the relentlessness of Mrs Chilton's attentions, this was a perfectly understandable wish. Hannibal nodded.

'You may rely on my discretion.'

He watched her negotiate the circular driveway, and a moment later shivered with pleasure as an arm slipped around his waist and pulled him back against a familiar solid chest. Instinctively, he turned and pressed his face to Will's shoulder, inhaling the meadow-fresh scent that he had detected well before Will had actually touched him.

'There you are.'

The tantalising warmth of Will's breath at his temple was irresistible, and Hannibal lifted his head, seeking Will's lips for a kiss. The light brush of Will's mouth against his own was most pleasant, but instantly Hannibal wanted more, and he curled his fingers around Will's lapels, holding him in place as he licked gently but insistently at the seam of Will's lips. The hands at his waist tightened, and then they were tasting each other in slow and deep exploration.

Will tasted of sweet fruit, of warm sunshine, and of that special essence that was simply Will. *My Will.*

It was a languorous and reluctant parting; and when finally they disentangled, their hands remained entwined.

‘What was all that about?’ Will looked beyond Hannibal, down to the gate where Miss Lounds fairly stomped. ‘Should I call Mr Franklyn?’

‘No, let her be.’ Hannibal rested his free palm against Will’s chest. ‘Mrs Chilton has been rather more than usually trying, that is all.’

‘Dear me.’ Will chuckled, then stiffened. ‘Hello, it seems that our errant guest has at last arrived.’

Hannibal turned then, and they watched as Mr Tier brought his horse to a stop, leaning down to speak a few words to Miss Lounds. She shook her head vigorously, clipped something in reply, and continued past him, disappearing quickly from view.

‘Hannibal,’ Will spoke lowly, his tone almost grave, as they observed Mr Tier watching her retreat, ‘do you see anything unusual in their interactions? Anything that might suggest a greater acquaintance than either are letting on?’

Hannibal flashed a look of scorn at his lover. ‘Certainly not. My dear Will, sometimes a conversation is just that. Besides,’ and here he permitted himself a secretive smile as he thought of Abigail and her very *real* hopes with regard to Mr Tier, ‘even if Miss Lounds has had the misfortune to develop a liking for Mr Tier, I happen to know for a fact that *he* has absolutely no thoughts in *that* direction.’

Clearly, Will did not like being contradicted in this manner, for he drew back instantly and tugged free his hand. ‘Oh, do you, now? I see.’ No warmth remained in that formerly placid voice. ‘Then might I suggest that as you are so intimate with the workings of Mr Tier’s heart, you should be the one to keep him entertained for however long he deigns to visit with us? I have better things to do than serve refreshments to a man who cannot keep time.’

Before Hannibal could retort, Will had swung away and stridden back out through the back door. Hannibal stared after him, exasperated, but before he could decide whether or not to follow, Randall Tier was marching past him into the house.

‘Damn hot day. Why is it that the moment the sun comes out, we all feel the need to expose ourselves to it immediately?’

‘Some for longer than others,’ Hannibal could not help but remark dryly, falling into step beside the disgruntled Alpha.

‘Hmph. Yes, well, my aunt had need of me this morning. I barely got away as it was.’

They passed through into the drawing room, wherein they found a table set up with a large serving bowl of lemonade and Chiyoh, sitting with a book. Her tranquil presence quickly

calmed the ruffled Mr Tier, and soon enough he was back to his cheerful self.

‘I have an idea,’ he announced, after draining a second goblet. ‘We should organise an expedition - perhaps to Virginia Hill, where at least there will be the benefit of a good breeze. We could take a picnic and make a day of it. What say you, Mrs Crawford?’

‘I have no objection to such a scheme,’ she smiled. ‘When were you thinking of?’

‘Why not tomorrow? Seize the day and all that.’ Mr Tier abandoned his drink and jumped to his feet. ‘Come, let us find the others.’

‘Perhaps the proposal should come from Mrs Crawford,’ suggested Hannibal smoothly, ‘in case anyone should object on the grounds that such a scheme would be too tiring for the ladies.’

Or in case Will should object on the grounds that the idea has come from Randall Tier. Really, he is ridiculously touchy on the subject.

As Hannibal had predicted, Chiyoh’s suggestion of a picnic was well-received by everyone. Even Will put aside his frowns to declare that they could all use Lupus Hall as their setting-off point. And as for Hannibal, he was buoyant with anticipation of the day that was to come and all of its delicious possibilities.

'It was badly done.'

They had a very fine day for Virginia Hill. One thing only spoiled the prospect of fine food and finer walks, and that was the atmosphere of strain which had been growing since the previous afternoon. Will cursed himself for the stubbornness that had kept him reserved and grave when Hannibal and Robert had taken their leave of him at Lupus Hall. If he had only bent a little, he thought moodily, he might not now be walking some distance behind the rest of the party with Mr Franklyn, Mr Budge (who had apparently been a frequent visitor to Applewood Cottage since the ball), and Miss Lounds - and, more to the point, Hannibal might not be so engrossed in conversation with Mr Tier as he now appeared to be. Certainly he had cast a number of questioning glances Will's way when first the party had assembled; but, receiving no encouragement, had soon ceased to bother. Jack was now listening dutifully to Mrs Chilton's high praises of her dear Pater's grounds, and of the hill that at its highest point was famous for its unparalleled views. Mr Chilton made a pretence of listening too, but seemed rather more interested in fly-swatting than anything else. Occasionally, Miss Hobbs peeped at the reverend nervously, but otherwise stayed close to Hannibal. Four of their companions from the previous day had not made the trip from Balmore: Mischa and Anthony, deeming the excursion too difficult for the children, had decided to spend the day with them at Scarfe Manor; Robert had been brought low by a headache, and as the sun was most likely the culprit, had opted to stay at Hartwell; and Chiyoh had volunteered to stay there with him.

The separateness of the present group was temporarily patched when finally they reached the summit, and cloths were spread and food laid out for their picnic. Will found himself impatient for the opportunity of speaking properly with Hannibal, who sat a little way off beside Mr Tier. But as plates were filled and passed around, the familiar way in which the young Alpha teased with looks and whispers *his Omega* sent a hot flood of fury through Will; and when he happened to catch Miss Lounds also observing the pair, he saw in her eyes a pain with which he could sympathise only too well.

Whatever Hannibal might have persuaded himself to the contrary, there most certainly exists something private between those two.

Whatever Hannibal was currently thinking - about Mr Tier, Miss Lounds, or indeed Will's distant behaviour - he was keeping it admirably hidden behind a mask of amused indulgence.

Perhaps he is simply content to wait out my ill humour.

Perhaps he has grown bored with me.

This last thought sent his heart plummeting. He looked again at Hannibal and Mr Tier, the latter leaning now so close to the former that he was practically in Hannibal's lap, and saw all the painful truth of it: two young people, sharp-witted and lively, handsome and commanding, eminently suited. Far more than...

Abruptly, he rose.

‘Will?’ Oblivious, Jack held up to him a freshly-filled goblet. ‘Would you care for some lemonade?’

‘Thank you, no. I would rather take a walk.’

‘Well, then, goodness,’ laughed Mr Franklyn, dabbing his brow with a white pocket handkerchief, ‘hand it over, Mr Crawford. For I would be glad of it!’

‘Just a moment, Mr Graham,’ Mr Tier called out cheerfully. ‘If you leave now, you will miss the game.’

‘Game?’ Mrs Chilton curled her lip.

‘Yes, Madam.’ And here Mr Tier cast a merry glance at Hannibal. ‘For I have it on good authority that Mr Lecter is a student of the human mind, and would therefore like to hear from each of you your thoughts on the success of our expedition.’

‘Is Mr Lecter sure that he would like to hear what we are all thinking of?’ For the first time since their testy final exchange the day before, Will met full on Hannibal’s gaze, wherein archness, frustration and defiance mingled in equal quantity. It should not have been beguiling, he supposed.

‘Definitely not.’ The succinctness of Hannibal’s reply was the only clue that he was perhaps not feeling as sanguine as he appeared. ‘It appears that Mr Tier finds amusement in speaking on my behalf.’

Ah, *there* was the snap of steel beneath the facade of velvet. It was what set Hannibal apart, what prevented him from being just another spoiled Omegan.

And Will loved him for it.

‘My apologies,’ laughed Mr Tier, looking not at all apologetic. ‘Perhaps we could each offer an entertaining insight or two. Offer three and I give you permission to make them as dull as ditchwater.’

The words barely penetrated. Will stood frozen, keenly aware of the violent thudding of his heart as the world faded away. How simple was the revelation, how laughably obvious. And how woefully, wilfully obtuse he had been. Someone was speaking. He blinked once, twice, and shook himself back to the sunlit grove. And to Hannibal. Hannibal, whose demeanour was now, if anything, even stiffer. His eyes slid immediately from Will’s, his cheeks flushed as if in embarrassment at having been caught staring.

‘Yes, indeed, I shall go first,’ Mr Franklyn was saying, looking around the group with great joviality. ‘I am certain that I shall be able to think of plenty of dull things to say.’

‘Wherein lies the problem,’ drawled Hannibal. ‘For today you must be limited to only three.’

It should not have been at all satisfying; certainly such rudeness was beneath him. But the look of surprised displeasure on Will’s face was, at least, a response of *some* kind after the

distance and detachment that had sent a chill trickling down Hannibal's spine as a taunting thought had crossed his mind.

Perhaps he has realised finally what a truly shallow creature I am and has tired of our liaison.

'Ah, yes, quite right.' Gone now was the light in Mr Franklyn's eyes, and his attempted laugh was a worse chastisement than any protestations of offence could have been. 'I must learn to be silent, I think.'

'Mr Franklyn.' With great dignity, Mr Budge rose and held out his hand to the pink-cheeked Beta. 'I wonder if you would care to take a turn with me? I feel the urge to walk off this delicious repast.'

'I shall join you, if I may.'

The charge of quiet anger in Will's voice was made worse by his refusal to look at Hannibal, and an awkward silence followed the trio's departure.

'Come, Mr Chilton.' Mrs Chilton was hardly bothering to mask her smirk. 'I would return to our carriage. *Children's* games are not my forte.'

Her husband harrumphed, stood with a wince, and lent his good lady a helping hand up.

'How very disagreeable people are being,' commented Mr Tier with a tight smile, as soon as the couple were out of sight. 'It must be the heat.'

'Well, well.' Jack laughed uneasily, peeling his apple with unusual concentration. 'The worst of it will soon pass, and then we shall all be ourselves again.'

'Or perhaps the sun has merely shone a light into our hidden corners, illuminating our truths.'

'Most poetic of you, Miss Lounds.' Mr Tier almost sneered the words. 'I take it that is *your* offering for our entertainment.'

'Take it however you like.' And with a dismissive toss of her head, Miss Lounds turned to Abigail, who was watching the exchange with wide eyes. 'Shall we follow my uncle and Mr Graham?'

'Of course, if you wish.'

And just like that, their party had dwindled to three. Full of envy that he could not abandon discretion and pursue Will himself in a bid to clear the air between them, Hannibal spent the next half hour in agonies of uncertainty, fielding quips from Jack and Mr Tier while simultaneously berating himself for his meanness towards Mr Franklyn. Altogether, this proved to be an exhausting business, and his nerves were strung tight by the time the rest of the party - sans the already-departed Chiltons - returned.

What a sober lot they all were as they traipsed wearily back down the hill to the waiting carriages. Will had not deigned to look Hannibal's way since his reappearance, and so it was

with some surprise and much trepidation that Hannibal found himself being pulled aside as he made to ascend the steps of his uncle's carriage.

'One moment, Hannibal. I have been racking my brains, but I cannot for the life of me fathom what possessed you to speak as you did to Mr Franklyn today. So please, enlighten me.'

The words, imbued as they were with stern remonstrance, were as nothing in comparison to the cold fury of Will's piercing stare. Discomfited, Hannibal shrugged off his lover's hand, attempting nonchalance even as his heart tapped out an uneven rhythm.

'It was a jest, Will. Why must you take it so to heart? I daresay Mr Franklyn has forgotten it already.'

'A jest?' Hannibal found that he liked Will's disbelieving tone even less than the words of repudiation that followed. 'You should know by now that I prefer sins of omission to outright lies. Admit it - you sought to slap him down.'

'To shut him up, perhaps,' muttered Hannibal. And, at Will's swift inhale, 'Do not pretend that you have not had similar thoughts on occasion.'

'Thoughts, not actions, Hannibal,' shot back Will, his expression grimmer by the moment. 'You humiliated a good man today before his peers, people who would be guided by your example. It was badly done. Very badly done, and I am exceedingly sorry for it.'

'I -'

But for the first time in his life, words failed Hannibal. Will's disappointment in him was palpable, and it was the one thing that he could not bear. He swallowed, took a breath, and prepared to try again - but too late. Will was already turning from him; and Hannibal could only watch, guilt piercing him with all the swift and ruthless justice of a knife, as the incensed Alpha strode away towards his own carriage.

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The few hours that Will slept in the grey silence before dawn were a triumph, considering the misery of recrimination and regret that had engulfed him since the previous afternoon. As deserved as Hannibal's dressing-down had been, Will knew that he had delivered it in a fog of jealousy and resentment that had less to do with a consideration for Mr Franklyn's feelings than with a desire to vent his own.

When finally the stillness of night gave way to the first stirrings of the household, it was a relief to rise and busy himself with the necessary ablutions, although nothing could sponge away the circles beneath his eyes or the lines of tension bracketing his mouth. Only one thing was likely to aid him in that respect, and he resolved to set out for Hartwell as soon as was practicable.

But first, there were estate matters to attend to, and it was with a determined smile and a ready handshake that he greeted his first appointment of the morning.

‘Matthew, how are you? It has been too long.’

Removing his hat, Matthew Brown tucked it under his arm and returned Will’s smile warmly. ‘It has indeed, sir. But we are all well, thank you, and the farm has yielded a good crop this year. Harvest time will be busy indeed.’

‘I have no doubt.’ Gesturing for his friend to be seated, Will leaned back against his desk and folded his arms. ‘But that is not why I asked you here this morning. As you know, my steward Mr Ingram has suffered a family misfortune in this last year with the death of his father.’

Matthew nodded solemnly. ‘I had heard, and I was very sorry for it.’

‘Well, now it seems that his mother is also ailing, and he has requested to be released from his duties indefinitely, in order to return home and care for her. His family owns a small estate and he is not without means, so I do not worry for him on that score.’

‘I see.’ Matthew frowned. ‘Then you wish me to help you choose the new steward?’

‘I wish you to *be* the new steward.’ Will chuckled at the look of astonishment that swept over his friend’s face. ‘Why so surprised? You have a fine head for numbers and an exceptional understanding of agricultural matters, not to mention excellent relations with everyone connected with the estate. I would be a fool not to offer you the post.’

‘Well, now.’ Scratching his head, Matthew exhaled slowly. ‘You have surprised me, and no mistake.’ In the next moment, however, he was on his feet and gripping Will’s extended hand. ‘But I daresay I would be an even bigger fool to turn you down. Thank you, sir, with all my heart. I shall do my utmost to repay your trust in me.’

They walked out together, full of plans for the next chapter in Lupus Hall’s history, and it was not until they were on the village high street that Will finally looked up - and almost bumped straight into Miss Hobbs, who put out a hand on his arm to steady herself.

‘My sincerest apologies, Miss Hobbs.’ Will placed his hand over hers. ‘Are you alright?’

‘Quite, sir, thank you.’ Her voice was curiously breathless, her colour high, and Will wondered at the reason until, cursing his foolishness, he recalled the recent history between the two people standing on either side of him.

‘Miss Hobbs.’ Expression grave, Matthew tipped his hat, and she in turn curtsied, eyes lowered.

‘Mr Brown.’

Heavens, but it was an awkward moment. The discomposure of both parties was almost painful to behold, and Will could only feel relief when Matthew muttered something about an early errand for his mother and walked off down a side alley. Miss Hobbs’ hand tightened on Will’s arm, and he patted it consolingly.

‘May I escort you to wherever you are going?’

‘To Hartwell House?’ She looked up then, brightening. ‘That is very kind of you, Mr Graham. But I would not wish to take you out of your way.’

The irony of this drew from him a reluctant chuckle. ‘Never fear, Miss Hobbs. I am exactly where I wish to be.’

And since the young lady seemed content to lean on him, Will thought it only polite to continue to offer her this paltry assistance all the way to Hartwell.

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Hannibal’s footsteps were slow, his thoughts pensive, as he stepped into the entrance hall and handed off his hat. Low murmurings drew his attention to the parlour with its half-open door, and he entered expecting to find his uncle with Abigail, only to come to an abrupt halt as his eyes fell on Will, seated beside her. The Alpha’s rich scent tugged painfully at him, as did the memory of the last time they had been together in this room.

Will’s half-hearted protestations when Hannibal had approached him, book abandoned, and straddled his lap with teasing whispers of what he wished to do for his Alpha. Teasing kisses growing purposeful and urgent, as hands wandered and fondled and stroked. Will’s erect member, beautifully swollen and dripping, released from his breeches by Hannibal’s eager hand; his stifled cries as Hannibal had worked him almost to the brink before sliding from his Alpha’s lap onto his knees, to lick and suck and moan his pleasure, rubbing desperately at his own hardness. And then the deliciousness of treacly warmth trickling down his throat, the helpless spurting of his own seed within his breeches, and the lazy open-mouthed kisses that had followed as Will had bent down to gather him back into his arms.

Had that truly been only a week ago?

As their eyes met, Hannibal saw in Will’s the same regret and hesitance that he knew must shadow his own. Instantly, he wished to tell Will of his morning venture, but how to introduce the topic without seeming boastful?

Thankfully, Uncle Robert chose that moment to enquire, ‘Ah, Hannibal, how were Mr Franklyn and Miss Lounds?’

‘You have visited them this morning?’ Will’s enquiry was husky.

‘I have.’ Hannibal looked at him unblinkingly, trying to convey both apology and self-reproach. ‘I felt it best.’

‘I am glad to hear it.’

What a change in Will’s voice from the harshness of their parting at Virginia Hill. Now, there was warmth in his tone and approbation in his look. More than that Hannibal did not allow himself to hope for, though it seemed for a fleeting moment that Will’s eyes had softened with more than just approval.

Uncle Robert cleared his throat. ‘Will was just saying his goodbyes, Hannibal.’

‘What?’ This somewhat inelegant response drew heat to his cheeks, but the plummeting of his heart overrode all other considerations. ‘You are going away?’

‘To London,’ supplied Abigail, rather mournfully.

Hannibal tried not to be irritated by his young friend’s superior knowledge of the situation, slightly mollified when Will rose and said to him, in a low voice, ‘Perhaps you would see me out.’

‘Of course.’

A final leave-taking with Uncle Robert and Abigail, and wordlessly Hannibal followed Will out, closing the front door behind them in a bid for privacy as they stood facing each other on the top step. A slight breeze ruffled the Alpha’s dark curls, and Hannibal ached to touch, to push them back from his lover’s brow. But so much had happened, he was by no means sure that such a gesture would be welcome.

‘It has been a trying few days.’ Will’s eyes lingered on his face. ‘You look tired.’

‘As do you,’ Hannibal shot back, slightly nettled.

Will grinned wryly. ‘At least we are agreeing again.’ The smile faded and his voice took on a more serious note. ‘Hannibal, I must apologise for the way I spoke to you yesterday. I was too hard on you. Heaven knows I, too, have been guilty in the past of wishing poor Mr Franklyn far away - perhaps, after all, a dose of honesty was needed. For how else is he ever to know self-improvement?’

Moved by Will’s simple admission and the laying aside of his pride, Hannibal replied, huskily, ‘Thank you, Will. That means a great deal to me. I own that I was careless in my choice of words, cavalier in my desire to entertain.’

‘Oh, Hannibal,’ murmured Will, leaning in to brush a soft kiss against his cheek, ‘you never cease to surprise me.’

The ache in Hannibal’s heart increased, unwanted tears forming in his eyes. ‘I know that I have been much at fault, and I daresay you would give me up now, but please do not act as though we are merely polite acquaintances.’

‘Give you up?’ Will stared at him. ‘Hannibal, why would you -’

Hannibal dropped his gaze, uncomfortable, and the next moment found his face cradled firmly between soft palms. His eyes flew to Will’s, and the possessive heat therein set his pulses thrumming with answering fierceness.

‘There is nothing remotely polite about the way I feel for you,’ growled Will, and crushed his lips against Hannibal’s.

Elated, greedy, Hannibal opened his mouth beneath the demanding pressure, and moaned as their tongues licked together. Within moments, they were clutching at each other, pressed

tight from hip to chest. A familiar helpless feeling of dazed arousal pulled from Hannibal a plea, whispered against Will's lips.

'Stay tonight, Alpha. I need you.'

Shuddering, eyes almost black, Will drew a harsh breath and pressed his forehead to Hannibal's.

'I cannot. I have promised to help Anthony make ready the London house for tenancy, and Mischa is bringing the children - she has an entire itinerary of entertainment planned. We are to leave within the hour.' He pulled back slightly and fixed Hannibal with an earnest look. 'But when I return, we should talk.'

'Of course.'

Hannibal's faint frown was kissed away with a fervency that silenced him; and before he could find his voice again, in protest or question, Will was off, long strides carrying him down the length of the drive and away through the gates before Hannibal could do more than stare after him. And wonder with a slight shiver why Will never once looked back.

'I cannot be wise.'

‘I do wish you would tell me what is wrong.’

Will swallowed the last of his Madeira, hauled himself out of the deep armchair in which he had been slumped for the previous hour, and dredged up a smile.

‘After a dozen evenings of being beaten soundly at cards by your excellent wife, I may be a little light of pocket, but the last thing that I feel is wronged, big brother.’

‘Will.’ Anthony made a sound of exasperation and closed his book with a snap. ‘Stop fobbing me off. Something is amiss, I know it. I knew it when you insisted on accompanying us here.’

‘Oh, so I have been playing gooseberry all of this time!’

‘Rot. You know how much I value your company. You have been an invaluable help in preparing the house for the new tenants. And Mischa cannot stop gushing about how wonderful you are with the children.’

Will held up a hand. ‘Alright, alright. Good grief, that will teach me to be provoking!’

Anthony folded his arms across his chest and levelled a severe look at Will. ‘Then are you ready to be serious?’

‘At four o’clock in the afternoon? What a ghastly prospect.’

Mischa’s timely arrival with the troop of boisterous young Grahams saved Will from more of his brother’s stern words. It could be only a short reprieve, of course, but any delay of a conversation that would inevitably be excruciating was welcome.

The simple truth was that he missed Hannibal. Missed him terribly. His voice, his scent, every tender moment and secret assignation. The arguments and the reconciliations. He would go back, of course. Back to Balmore and Hartwell and his infuriating boy. But not to pick up where they had left off. Not to be *Nakama.* To be sure, stolen pleasure was beguiling, but it was no longer enough. Not now that he had finally faced and accepted the depth of his feelings.

‘You are in love with Hannibal.’

He had scarcely noticed his brother move to stand beside him. Anthony spoke quietly, though Mischa and the children were now entirely occupied in cushion fort building at the other end of the room.

Will fixed his eyes on Florence and Valentine. Their tumbling antics were drawing shrieks of delight from little Hanna, who sat with wobbly triumph on the soft carpet, watched over by her doting mama. Mischa, dear Mischa, whose resemblance to her brother ensured that he could not be forgotten for even a moment. Will cleared his throat.

‘You really have been making a study of me.’

He winced at the unsteadiness of his voice, but the teasing comment he was expecting never came. Instead, a comforting hand squeezed his shoulder.

‘What can I do, Will?’

Huffing a laugh that was really more of a broken sigh, Will scrubbed a hand across his mouth. Mischa looked across at them then, her head tilted in such a *Hannibal* way that for a moment, Will missed his lover with an intensity that robbed him of breath.

The sharp rap of the front door knocker had the two boys scrambling to be the first to intercept whatever novelty awaited them on the other side. Their excitable enquiries rang through from the outer hall; and when they returned, it was Valentine who held aloft a sealed letter, batting away his scowling younger brother.

‘Papa, I answered the door all by myself.’

‘Did not,’ grumbled Florence. ‘Roman helped you.’

Glad to put aside his troubled thoughts for at least a little while, Will grinned at Anthony.

‘Do they remind you of anyone?’

‘Us, you mean?’ Anthony chuckled. ‘Oh, yes. Even down to the saintliness of the butler.’ He held out his hand for the letter. ‘Thank you, Valentine. I will take that.’ And as he glanced at the seal, a note of surprise crept into his voice. ‘Why, it is from Chiyoh, for you, Will.’

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‘What a pity it is that Mr Tier has had to leave.’ Abigail paused her playing, disgruntlement knitting her brow. ‘Everyone seems to be going away.’

‘Rather an exaggeration, Abigail.’ Hannibal leaned across her and turned the page of sheet music, determinedly *not* thinking of Will. ‘And it is hardly poor Mr Tier’s fault that his aunt has suffered a relapse. Now, concentrate. And when - a certain person - returns, you will be able to play for *them.*’

‘Oh, how delightful that would be.’ And she clapped her hands.

Fresh and pretty in pink silk, shining chestnut curls pinned and beribboned, Abigail seemed now a million miles from the shy girl who had, merely nine months before, been set on throwing herself away on a farmer. Lost in self-congratulation, Hannibal failed at first to register the presence of a third party. But a discreet cough drew his attention to the doorway and his butler, who bore an apologetic expression and a silver salver.

‘Yes, Donald?’

‘A letter, sir, from Brock Hall. Mr Crawford’s man is waiting outside. He requests an immediate answer, sir.’

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A sombre pall hung over the little gathering in the drawing room at Brock Hall. Even the lights seemed dimmer than usual. Hannibal sat opposite his friends, and attempted once more to parse the information that Chiyoh had twice repeated.

‘Randall Tier and Fredricka Lounds? Are you certain?’

‘They have been engaged these six months, ever since Weymouth.’ Chiyoh’s dark eyes reflected all the pain of unwanted discovery, the shadows beneath them unhappy smudges in her wan face. ‘But Randall’s aunt had very decided opinions about who would and would not measure up as a prospective daughter-in-law, and Miss Lounds would most certainly have been rejected as a most unsuitable candidate.’

‘Randall could have come to me. To us. He would not have been destitute.’ Jack’s shoulders were slumped, his expression bewildered.

‘No, my dear.’ Chiyoh’s tone was gentle. ‘But he would have lost his inheritance from your sister, and that is no small thing.’ Again she turned her attention to Hannibal. ‘Poor Jane’s death rendered further secrecy unnecessary, and so Randall came to us this morning to - unburden himself.’

Jack shifted uncomfortably on the sofa as Chiyoh held tightly onto his hand, and the look of tender understanding that passed between them made Hannibal envious. He thought fleetingly of Will, stomach dipping in a way that had become all too familiar, but since pining would make neither the time pass more quickly or Will materialise instantly in front of him, he set his jaw and returned his attention to his companions.

‘I blame myself. I should never have sent Randall away after his mother’s death.’ Jack shook his head. ‘My sister clung to him too much - he was her only solace in a life dominated by ill health. Little wonder he sought escape.’

‘In masquerade?’ Despite his personal indifference to Randall Tier’s choice, Hannibal could not help but feel aggrieved, particularly on Abigail’s account. ‘He has flirted his way through the town, and pretended to be at liberty to do so. As his Omegan match, Miss Lounds must have suffered terribly.’

At this, Jack looked even more stricken. ‘How did it come to this?’

‘Now that will do, the pair of you.’ Chiyoh levelled at them a stern encompassing look. ‘Hannibal, *you* are hardly a stranger to the game of intrigue, with your protégée and your penchant for keeping secrets.’

‘I cannot imagine what you mean,’ replied Hannibal stiffly, preparing himself mentally for battle, but Chiyoh addressed her next words to her mournful husband.

‘And Jack, it is past time that you recognised your son as the adult he is. Allow *him* to feel the weight of responsibility for this situation. I promise you, he will be the better for it.’

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Poor Abigail.

On the short carriage ride back to Hartwell, Hannibal rehearsed how best to break the news to the young girl whom he seemed doomed to lead from one disappointment to another. He found her still within the salon, though she had exchanged the pianoforte for a book, and upon his entrance she looked up from her comfortable seat in the window with a bright smile.

'I hope that all is well at Brock Hall.'

Anticipating with dread the rapid dimming of that lovely smile, Hannibal drew a chair close to the window seat, and prepared to reveal the dreadful truth.

The dreadful truth did not have the impact that he had been expecting.

'Mr Tier and Miss Lounds? How odd. Still, sometimes people are kept apart by circumstances beyond their control, and such situations are surely to be pitied.'

Hannibal looked askance at the airy creature before him. 'Abigail, I do not think that you heard me correctly. They are to be married.'

'Yes.'

'Mr Tier has never been free, the entire time he has been among us.'

'Yes.'

The urge to shake her out of this unsettling mood prompted him to say bluntly, 'It is the end of all your hopes.'

She regarded him then with a look of incredulity. '*My* hopes? My dear Hannibal, why would *I* care whom Mr Tier marries?'

'Because you are in love with him.'

'With *him*?' And she laughed. 'Hannibal, do not tease so. You know perfectly well whom it is that I love.'

A sick feeling began to unfurl in Hannibal's stomach. 'The Alpha who came to your aid on the road.'

'The Alpha who came to my aid at the masquerade.'

No. It cannot be. He cleared his throat, collected himself, and directed at his friend a piercing stare.

'Abigail, let us now be perfectly clear. Are you speaking of - of Will Graham?'

'Of course!'

The cheerful words struck Hannibal as a devastating blow, and only an immense effort kept him in his seat.

Abigail was shaking her head with impatience. ‘But you know this, I know you do. For it was you who told me that it was a fine thing for me to have set my heart on such a worthy gentleman.’

On the brink of declaring robustly that he had said no such thing, Hannibal recalled the one detail that forced him to swallow his denial.

‘We never said his name.’

‘Are you sure?’ Abigail wrinkled her brow, and the pertness that Hannibal had long admired - nay, *encouraged* - in her, now scraped at his nerves.

‘Perfectly.’ He moderated his tone from the snap which he could see gave her pause, for there was yet one morsel of hope. ‘Abigail, I must ask. Have you any idea of Mr Graham’s returning your affection?’

‘Oh yes.’ She sighed dreamily. ‘I recall the last time we saw each other, when we were all together here. Mr Graham had volunteered to escort me, and he offered me his arm. And I shall never forget his words to me as we walked. ‘I am exactly where I wish to be.’’

‘I am exactly where I wish to be.’

Hannibal felt the thrum of those words like a death knell. And images floated before him, taunting, mocking. Will dancing with Abigail at the masquerade; Will singling Abigail out at Lupus Hall; Will sitting beside Abigail here in this very house, on the day he had left for London.

To me, he offered Nakama. To Abigail Hobbs, will he offer marriage?

A singular pain at this, sharp and raw, delivered swift and shocking clarity. It darted through him, with the speed of an arrow, that Will must marry no one but himself!

***

‘Damn bird, be off with you!’

It was inconceivable to Will that he had raced back to Balmore all the way from London in a mere half a day, dodging carts, wagons, and herds of sheep, only to be prevented from setting foot in Hartwell House by the hellish fowl currently snapping its beak at him from the front doorstep, feathers bristling in a soaring arc of indignation.

‘Let me pass!’

But no matter which way he edged, the lunatic creature blocked him, having apparently claimed the space as its personal territory.

‘Right,’ he muttered, backing away and keeping his eyes fixed firmly on the wretched animal, lest it should lunge at him once again. ‘The back door it is, you fiend.’

Muttering beneath his breath, Will strode around the perimeter of the house. The ride from London had been uncommonly hot, and he tugged at his neckcloth, wishing that he could remove it. He turned the final corner, and rational thought fled as he all but collided with an achingly familiar form. Hannibal, regally handsome in turquoise and cream, black boots shining, hair swept neatly across his brow. Beside him, Will instantly felt uncommonly dishevelled. He reached out instinctively, senses alight at the scent and sight of his lover. But Hannibal jerked back, eyes stormy, lips compressed. Will’s heart sank.

‘I see that the news has reached you already. I had hoped that you would take it more -’

‘What? Rationally? Calmly?’

A bitter laugh, the likes of which Will had never before heard, seemed to tear its way from the back of Hannibal’s throat. It sent a chill through him.

‘Do you really care so much?’

‘Did you expect me not to?’ shot back Hannibal. ‘Would it have made it easier if I had stepped aside with an understanding smile and my blessing?’

Will paused. Something was amiss, out of alignment in a way that he could not yet see. He moved again towards Hannibal, who immediately retreated once more. Will stopped, removed his hat, and ran a hand through sweat-sticky hair. Perhaps a different tack would yield a better response.

‘Hannibal, before I left, I said that upon my return we should talk.’

If anything, Hannibal’s expression grew even more hostile. ‘And if I should not wish to?’

Will regarded him bleakly. ‘I see that you are very much affected by what has happened. And perhaps, were I wise, I would leave well enough alone. But no. I cannot be wise. Not any longer. Hannibal, I must tell you that I -’

‘No!’

There was such a wealth of pain in that one choked-out word that Will reached out and grasped Hannibal’s wrist, resisting the boy’s furious tugging, and pulling him into a fierce embrace.

‘I cannot bear to see you like this,’ he whispered raggedly, lips brushing Hannibal’s temple. ‘Why do you torture yourself? You are worth so much more.’

Insistent hands pressed to his chest, shoving him away, and this time Will released his hold, helplessness draining him of fight.

‘How dare you?’ Hannibal narrowed his eyes, the flush on his cheeks the only indication that he had been affected by their physical proximity. ‘You tell me that I am worthy, while

promising yourself to another! Tell me, Will, did you think that we would continue as before? That I would agree to keep your bed warm once you had grown tired of your Betan wife?'

'My *what*?'

Straightening the cuffs of his jacket, Hannibal sneered, 'Surely you cannot have forgotten already the damsel whom you rescued from Mr Chilton? Whose presence was, as you so touchingly declared to her, *exactly where you wished to be*?'

In the next instant, all the pieces of the puzzle slotted into place, and a warmth stole through Will that chased away every atom of cold. He dropped his hat to the ground, fingers nerveless, heart pounding.

'Abigail Hobbs,' he breathed. 'You think that I have formed an attachment to Abigail Hobbs.'

Hannibal did not deign to reply, but it no longer mattered. Will looked at his seething, glaring, beautiful boy, and ached for want of him.

'Come here.'

'I shall not.'

The proud jut of Hannibal's chin as he turned aside was at odds with the slight tremor in his voice.

'You know,' Will continued conversationally, 'if I did not love you to utter distraction, I believe that I would by now be quite exasperated.'

Hannibal's eyes snapped back to his, glowing gold, almost vicious in desperation. 'What did you say?'

'I said,' repeated Will slowly, a smile tugging at his lips, 'come here.'

Gone then was the austere, remote boy who had shied from him; Hannibal surged forward, gripping Will's collar, and hauled him in for a bruising kiss. Will's lips parted readily beneath his boy's, allowing him to plunder, knowing that he was being reclaimed. He slid his arms around Hannibal's waist and tugged him closer still until no space remained between their bodies. Greedy for his Omega, Will licked into his mouth, and as they tasted each other again, they shared moans and sighs. It was ravagement; it was bliss.

On a hitched breath, Hannibal pulled back, although he could not resist sucking on the plump perfection of Will's lower lip once more, to see it glisten, red and swollen, beneath his attentions.

'What did you say?' His voice was hoarse, laced with desperation.

This time, Will did not smile.

'I said,' he repeated softly, eyes indigo-dark, 'I love you.'

Fear, the merest glimmer, was overwhelmed quickly by a rush of joy.

Setting his palm to Will's cheek, Hannibal replied, somewhat shakily, 'I love you, Will. I did not realise how much until I thought that I had lost you, but I know now that I have loved you always. And I shall love you until the day I die.' His eyes pricked with tears as he pressed his lips once more to Will's in tender affirmation.

When they again drew apart for breath, Will's eyes too were shining. 'I wish that *I* could make speeches.' He laughed, self-derision in his voice. 'But you know what I am.'

'Yes.' Hannibal threaded a possessive hand into Will's curls. 'You are mine. My Alpha. My love. My Will.'

'Hm.' Tenderness and humour danced in Will's eyes. 'Not your Nakama?'

Thoughts of the passion-drenched nights they had shared, the mutual worship in hidden corners, the delicious weight of his lover pinning him, quickened Hannibal's pulse. Heat flared, desire blooming now that the agony of uncertainty had been quelled. Daringly, he trailed a hand down Will's throat, his chest, his stomach taut beneath riding breeches, to cup his burgeoning hardness.

'Perhaps also my Nakama,' he murmured, nuzzling a kiss into the hot, salty column of Will's neck. 'If the fancy should take us.'

'Wretched boy,' groaned Will, hand covering Hannibal's and pushing down just once before lifting it away. 'You would have me undone before the world.'

But the kisses that he bestowed upon the fingertips of that same hand, and the sultriness of his gaze as he did so, belied the admonishment of his words.

'There is one thing other that I would be.' Will's free hand curled around the nape of Hannibal's neck, bringing him so close that his next words were whispered against Hannibal's mouth. 'Your husband.'

Their lips met again, sure and searching, tongues seeking and stroking. Hannibal broke off to murmur, 'Yes. Yes, Will,' before claiming another deep kiss.

‘I cannot recall a time when you were not first in my heart.’

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Neither feeling ready yet to share their news, and with much still to say, they retreated to the walled garden, and there took possession of a shaded bench surrounded by fat, colourful lupins and towering delphiniums. There was a momentary awkwardness when neither knew quite how to arrange themselves, but Will solved the conundrum by drawing Hannibal in for a thorough kissing, after which they settled back together with perfect ease.

‘Did you truly believe that I favoured Randall Tier over you?’

Beneath the lightness of tone, Will detected a note of hurt, and he pressed a kiss to Hannibal’s hair, wrapping his arms more tightly around the boy who reclined against him.

‘Over a nagging old Alpha who prefers walking to dancing, reading to cards, and fishing to riding? It had not seemed completely out of the realm of possibility.’

Hannibal snorted. ‘Seven-and-thirty is hardly decrepit, Will.’

‘And yet you cannot deny that Randall Tier would have been the more obvious match, in both age and temperament.’ Will hesitated, then confessed, ‘Long before he came to Balmore, I resented the very idea of him.’

‘As I resented Fredricka Lounds, knowing your very high opinion of her. An intellectual, of far more substance than your spoiled, shallow young neighbour.’

A short silence followed. Will slid his hand atop Hannibal’s where it rested in his lap, and laced their fingers together.

‘Spoiled, perhaps. But you are anything but shallow. Indeed, you hide your intelligence in plain sight, allowing the world to see only what it expects of a rich young Omega.’

‘*You* saw more,’ murmured Hannibal, turning his head to meet Will’s gaze. ‘You saw *me.*’

‘Because you allowed me to.’ Will smiled, eyes lingering on features as yet youthfully rounded, that he knew would be sculpted by time into singular beauty, stark and severe. ‘Behind that veil of privilege, you are quite a person to know, Hannibal Lecter.’ Because he could not help himself, he curved his free hand around Hannibal’s jaw, tilting his chin, and lowered his head to brush their lips together. ‘And I am proud to call you mine,’ he whispered, when at length they parted.

The subject of Abigail Hobbs was somewhat thornier, and it did not take long for an argument to threaten.

‘I suppose that I must now begin looking for another suitor for her,’ sniffed Hannibal, as they strolled back across the lawn.

Will rolled his eyes. ‘Or you could finally acknowledge the eminent suitability of Mathew Brown. He still adores her, you know. I cannot think why, after the way she has treated him.’

‘I was under the impression that you liked Abigail.’

Hannibal’s response was downright huffy, but on this point Will refused to humour him.

‘Yes, but *I* have never considered her as a marriage prospect.’

To his surprise, he found himself tugged to a stop, Hannibal regarding him with an uncertainty that rent his heart.

‘When I thought that you did - that you had chosen her over me -’

He trailed off, pain flashing across his fine features, and Will could not bear it. He pulled his boy close, cupping his face, allowing all of the love that he felt to blaze from his eyes.

‘Hannibal, I cannot recall a time when you were not first in my heart. When you were a child, I wished only to protect you and your sister from the cruelties of this world. To banish the darkness that your parents’ death cast you into. It was my privilege to aid Robert in that endeavour. And then you grew up.’ Wonderingly, he smoothed his thumb across one jutting cheekbone. ‘And although I hardly knew how, my feelings for you changed.’

Hannibal’s arms slid around his waist. ‘When did you know?’

Will regarded him with mock severity. ‘Not long after you turned twenty, when you were busy matchmaking between Jack and your dear Chiyoh, and all you seemed able to talk of was Jack’s son and how you longed to see him at last in the flesh.’

‘I was merely curious.’

‘Hmph.’

‘And you were jealous.’

‘It irked me.’

‘You were jealous.’

Kissing away Hannibal’s smirk was a satisfaction in itself, although hardly conducive to a return to etiquette.

***

The relief and happiness that Hannibal felt upon receiving his uncle’s heartfelt blessings and the swiftly-sent felicitations of the Lecter and Crawford households, was tempered by the muted note of congratulations which he received from Abigail a few days after his own letter of explanation to her.

‘Give her time.’ Eyeing him sympathetically from over the rim of his newspaper, Robert confided, ‘Will told me yesterday that Mr Brown intends to renew his addresses to our dear Abigail. I am sure that she will soon be her old cheerful self again.’

‘But if she is truly in love with Will -’ Hannibal broke off, irritated by his uncle’s chuckle. ‘It is possible, you know.’

‘I know that there is no other in the world for *you,* Hannibal, and for that I could not be more delighted. But it seems to me that Abigail Hobbs has loved only one person independently of your influence, and that person was Matthew Brown.’

‘Will appears to have told you an awful lot,’ grumbled Hannibal, torn between being flustered and hopeful.

But Robert merely chortled, and returned to his paper.

***

The passage of several weeks wrought notable changes in Balmore. Mr Tier and Miss Lounds decamped to the Prices’ estate, and were married there with Jack’s blessing. He was unable to attend the wedding himself, being required at home for a joyous event of his own. And it was a happy day at the end of August when Hannibal and Will visited Brock Hall, and were introduced to the newest member of the family.

‘Brianna Felicity Crawford,’ recited the proud papa, a protective hand on his wife’s shoulder as she sat cradling the sleepy infant, contentment written across her delicate features. ‘Well, Hannibal, what do you think?’

‘She is very pretty.’

If there was a little of enthusiasm lacking in his voice, no one commented on it, and the rest of the visit passed most pleasantly. Once alone again, however, Hannibal found himself the object of Will’s curious gaze.

‘Is everything alright? You were very quiet in there.’

‘Possibly because Jack’s effusions on the amazing abilities of his latest offspring allowed no one else much opportunity to speak.’ He had meant the words to be light-hearted, but the sharpness which coloured them brought smudges of crimson to his cheeks.

Will did not respond immediately, and they had walked some distance in silence before he said finally, ‘I do not know what you imagine that I expect upon our marriage, but perhaps it will comfort you to know that producing *offspring* has not been at the forefront of my mind.’

The lack of delicacy in this statement betrayed a certain amount of annoyance, yet Hannibal could not help but be relieved. ‘Are you certain? It is surely something that most Alphas would demand of their Omegas.’

If anything, Will’s lips tightened further. ‘How little you do think of us.’

Beginning to bristle, Hannibal retorted, ‘Not at all. But you must own that Omegas are desired principally for their child-bearing capabilities.’

To his alarm, Will stopped abruptly. ‘I think that I should return to Lupus Hall.’

He did not look at Hannibal, who felt uncustomarily lost for words, and it was only when Will began striding off back up the lane that he roused himself enough to call after him.

‘Shall we see you at dinner?’

‘Perhaps.’

The shortness with which Will flung this word over his shoulder stayed with Hannibal all the way home.

Stomach in knots, he was ill-prepared for yet another surprise, but the presence of a nervous-looking Abigail in the parlour was not something which could be ignored. Luckily, she seemed determined to do the majority of the talking, and Hannibal listened with half an ear as he attempted to bring order to his racing thoughts.

‘Oh, Hannibal, I cannot tell you how sorry I am that I stayed away so long. After all that you and Mr Lecter have done for me, it was unpardonably rude.’ Rushing to him, she took his hands and squeezed. ‘But I have something that I simply must share with you, even though you will probably wish me gone the moment after I have said it.’

This, at last, caught his attention. ‘What is it, Abigail? Do calm down and be seated.’

But still she clutched at his hands, and in the end Hannibal led her across to the sofa, where they sat down together, facing each other. ‘Now, then. Tell me.’

‘It is only this.’ And a wide smile broke over her lovely face. ‘Mr Brown has been courting me these last few weeks, and this morning he asked for my hand. And I - I said yes! And even though,’ she continued in a rush, ‘I know that you will not want to know me anymore, I had to tell you before anybody else.’

‘Oh, Abigail.’ Overtaken by remorse, Hannibal embraced his young friend. ‘Forgive me. I have been an exceptionally incompetent matchmaker, and I can only be glad that you have at last found real love *despite* my help.’

***

Will told himself that he would *not* return to Hartwell that night. Even as he changed for dinner, donning the moss-green jacket that he knew was Hannibal’s favourite, and allowed his hair to be artfully rumpled into curls that he knew would make Hannibal’s fingers itch to touch, he told himself over and over that he would stay away. As he marched up the gravel path leading to the front door, he reasoned that although his presence would be expected by Robert, he would not linger after the meal. And when the meal was done, and he had spoken at length with Robert on every topic but the upcoming nuptials, ignoring Hannibal as thoroughly as he was in turn ignored by the grave and silent boy, he accepted Robert’s

invitation to stay for the night only because rain had begun to spatter the lead-crossed window panes, sparkling like so many tears.

The air in his chamber was treacle-thick as he undressed, eschewing a nightshirt to slide naked beneath cool sheets. Far from sleep, he gazed unseeingly at the vaulted ceiling, arms crossed above his head.

What am I doing here?

The answer to that question came moments later, with the betraying creak of the door and a familiar shadow moving through the darkness towards the foot of the bed. Scent all the sweeter for trepidation, hair spilling into eyes dark with worry, Hannibal stood for so long in silence that Will half expected him to turn and leave again. His relief, when finally Hannibal spoke, was telling.

'I am sorry.'

Raising himself onto his elbows, Will regarded the boy broodingly. 'Dare I ask for what?'

Hannibal's chin jerked up a little at that, but he subsided quickly. 'I know that I was rude.'

'Unconscionably rude. And *wrong.*'

'Because you do not wish for children?'

Hannibal's tone was frustratingly difficult to read, but his expression hinted at a vulnerability that made Will ache. Coming to a quick decision, he shook his head.

'Because I am far too deeply in love with you to wish to share you so soon.' He sat up a little straighter. 'Because I see and want *you,* Hannibal, nothing beyond.' He smiled, slow and sensual. 'Because if, oneday, *we* choose to have children, I shall be glad principally because they will be living reminders of our love.'

Tears stood in Hannibal's eyes. 'I am such a fool.'

'Yes,' replied Will huskily, 'but you are *my* fool. Now come here.'

He watched, rampant hunger in his gaze, as the boy reached down to bunch within his hands the hem of his thin nightshirt and draw it up over his head. The sight of that long, lean, pale body bared completely to him drew from Will a low, possessive growl.

Eyes steady on Will's face, Hannibal set his hands to the bed, crawling up and over the covers with slow intent until he had Will caged. On all fours, he dipped low, and Will threw back his head with a groan as a cool tongue flicked first at one nipple and then the other. The tip of Hannibal's erection brushed Will's stomach, and the scent of slick grew ripe between them with every pass of Hannibal's tongue. Will allowed him to lick and suckle until the nubs grew almost unbearably tender, and his hips rose from the bed, seeking friction of a different kind. He gasped as his swelling length slipped between Hannibal's slicked thighs, and rubbed in a daze of pleasure, seeking blindly that final, vital connection. When his tip caught on Hannibal's entrance, he grabbed the boy's hips to still them; but Hannibal clearly had ideas of

his own, for he reached back and guided Will's sheath within himself, pushing down to take him wholly inside. They thrust together, hard and fast; and when Will's knot began to form, Hannibal ground himself against it, eyes almost wild as it popped inside. Will reached then for his boy's leaking length, curling his fingers around it in slow pulls. Hannibal arched, pink mouth slack, chest a perfect ivory curve, gold-dusted.

'My gods, you are beautiful,' breathed Will, words pleasure-slurred. With his free hand, he stroked across Hannibal's belly, feeling the delightful tightening of muscle, then up to rub roughly across the sensitive nipples that could bring Hannibal so easily to climax.

With a hiss, Hannibal grabbed both of Will's hands and forced them above his head. They rocked together, movements frantic now. A hot face burrowed into the curve of Will's neck, but it was only when he felt sharp teeth graze his mating gland that Will stiffened.

'Hannibal, no -'

'Let me.' The words were groaned into his skin. 'I would have you for my mate, Will.'

'Soon.' How difficult it was to think clearly, with Hannibal's body squeezing pleasure out of him with every undulation. 'When we marry.'

'Now.' It was almost a whine. 'Claim me. Make me yours as I would make you mine.'

Words calculated to steal his breath, to speed his heart, to rouse within him a ferocious need to *take* and mark the boy forever as his.

Rolling them over in a deliberate reversal, Will kissed his boy to silence.

'Manipulative,' he growled, trailing his lips down Hannibal's throat.

'Yes.'

'Menace.' Setting his teeth to the juncture just above the fine sculpt of collarbone.

'Yes.'

'*Mine.*' And he bit down.

Hannibal cried out, hands clutching to press Will harder against him, the sting of penetration fading quickly into a feedback loop of intense pleasure. *Will's* pleasure. When Will lifted his head, he looked for a moment almost feral, but it was without an ounce of fear that Hannibal reached for him, licking the blood from his lips. Licks turned to deep kisses, until with a hoarse plea, Will broke off and bared his own neck. How eagerly then did Hannibal sink his own teeth into his love. He fed as if starved, and when it was done, they writhed together to climax.

For stunned moments, they stared at each other, each catching for the first time the tendrils of the other's feelings. It was disconcerting, Hannibal decided, endeavouring to slow his breathing. Disconcerting and quite, quite wonderful. He pressed his cheek to Will's, wanting

closeness, wanting to hide. And as if he knew, Will brought up a hand to cradle the back of his head, gentling, soothing.

For some time they remained tightly entwined, until their bodies were able to separate and common sense dictated that they tend to their wounds. As superficial as they were, they would scar, and it occurred to Hannibal for the first time that perhaps his timing could have been better.

‘Was it very wicked of me not to want to wait?’

He winced as Will applied a dressing to the bite that would forever mark him as a mated Omega, but Will’s answering chuckle relaxed him a little.

‘Of course, but I would expect nothing less of you, my darling. Besides, no one need know.’

‘Thank goodness for neckcloths.’

‘Indeed.’

Once sufficiently cleaned up, they removed to Hannibal’s chamber, and lay sated within the circle of each other’s arms.

‘I want you here every night until the wedding,’ murmured Hannibal, with sleepy insistence. ‘And when we are at Lupus Hall, I want you to keep your promise and bed me for an entire day.’

‘Demanding thing,’ said Will, fondly. ‘What have I got myself into?’

‘I would not mind, you know,’ Hannibal ventured quietly, after a few minutes of contented silence. ‘In a few years, if you wanted to.’

‘Hannibal?’ Will brushed the hair from his face, peering at him with concern.

Hannibal cleared his throat. ‘Children. I think I would like to, someday. It would be rather nice to have a miniature of you -’

‘Oh, my love.’

Who reached for whom first, it was not certain, but the tenderness that followed spoke more eloquently than any words of the very deep love that existed between Hannibal Lecter and Will Graham, and that nothing except the end of time itself would ever have the power to erase.

Chapter End Notes

So that, my friends, is the end! As I was writing the final scene, it felt more and more that it was the right place to finish. So I left our boys blissfully happy in bed. I hope you

agree that it was as good a time as any to bring down the curtain!

My next work will be my first ever non-Omegaverse Regency romance. I have called it Inconvenient, and it features a canon-age Hannibal and a young Will. There will be intrigues, angst, death (not theirs!), duels, forbidden romance (most definitely theirs!), and a great deal of sex. I hope that you will consider reading it when it posts later in 2020.

For now, thank you a thousand times over for supporting this fic. I love you all!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!